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FROM TOBRUK TO SMOLENSK

by

STRATEGICUS

This is the third volume of the survey of the war for intelligent readers by the military critic who writes under the *nom de guerre* of *Strategicus* and is, as *Time and Tide* says, 'one of the small band who win attention from both soldiers and civilians'.

It takes up the narrative where it was left in *From Dunkirk to Benghazi*; and it covers a period of the war crowded with significant events, including the reverses in Libya, Greece, and Crete, and the more successful campaigns in Abyssinia, Iraq, and Syria, besides the vast operations of the Battle of the Atlantic, in the air, and on the Eastern front.

From Tobruk to Smolensk

by the same author

★

THE WAR FOR WORLD POWER

FROM DUNKIRK TO BENGHAZI

FROM TOBRUK TO SMOLENSK

by

STRATEGICUS

'Je pouvais marcher à la Russie à la tête de l'Europe. L'entreprise était populaire, la cause était européenne; c'était le dernier effort qui restait à faire à la France; ses destinées celles du nouveau système européen étaient au bout de la lutte.' NAPOLÉON, *April*, 1816.

FABER AND FABER LIMITED
24 Russell Square
London

First published in December Mcmxli
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square, London, W.C.1
Printed in Great Britain by
Western Printing Services Limited, Bristol
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Class No, क्लास 940.5
Book No, पुस्तक St 767 F
Received on 1-3-45

To M.
but for whom this book would never have
been written

Preface

This book is a sequel to *The War for World Power* and *From Dunkirk to Benghazi*. It has been written upon the same broad lines as an attempt to disentangle from the amazing confusion of events those which are the most significant and, while there has been some endeavour to admit the jurisdiction of chronology, events have been grouped as far as possible in episodes that have a certain unity.

It differs from the preceding volumes in showing the decisive character of the operations. From more concentrated though skilful operations it developed into movements which for mass and momentum have no parallel in history. It has the sort of discontinuity that exists between the art of the miniaturist and that of the scene painter; and yet it is evident that the attitudes and outlooks that conditioned earlier military operations dominated these. It can hardly fail to be realized that the attitude towards defence that caused the fall of France would have led to defeat throughout this period and that the Russians escaped defeat and inflicted damage on their opponents in the measure that they attacked and in so far as they failed it was due to their acting upon the defensive.

The great Clausewitz who extolled the defensive as the

stronger form of warfare was writing of men of hard fibre and unyielding will. It apparently never entered that single-track, characteristically German mind that men might take the defence as a shield against the hardships of war. It would never have occurred to him that defences were the things that mattered and not men. The Germans were successful because they perpetually acted on the offensive and the Allies were unsuccessful in so far as they acted on the defensive. This is not to say that Clausewitz was wrong; but simply to insist that he was a real man who would never have thought it possible to regard an arrangement of concrete, even if reinforced with iron, elaborated into compartments and electrically lighted, as a substitute for the resolute human spirit. He would have realized instinctively that the only type of man for whom defences can provide a real protection is the man who does not need them, and that the man who depends upon defences will always find them fail him.

This may now be to labour the obvious. The point is that in so far as the Russians were successful in these colossal battles in the East they succeeded by taking their courage in their hands and attacking. If, early in the German campaign, they had gathered up the energy they expended in small counter-attacks into a counter-offensive they might have succeeded beyond anyone's imagination. Their counter-attacks, their active, défiant defensive, saved them where a passive defensive would have led to disaster.

The war in this period drifted from its moorings entirely and seemed to threaten to engulf not only the whole of Europe but also Africa, and Far Eastern Asia. Germany was determined to conquer the world and she had discovered the immense liberty and power enjoyed by anyone who will set all established rules and conventions at defi-

ance. Theoretically so plain, this fact is difficult to grasp in its actual application; and it is more difficult, even in these days of gangsters, to imagine that anyone should apply the principle to nations. The difficulty derives from the reluctance to admit the obvious fact that there are people in whom ideas of race and nationality appear to fester. It is probable that no-one could devise and apply an attempt to secure world power for himself; but it is not at all impossible that one could do it for his race. It is because nationality has come to mean so little to the democratic peoples that they cannot imagine the lengths to which Germans may be disposed to go to establish their race in control of the world.

A clearer glimpse of the attempt emerges through the events of this period; and that attachment to principles other than self-interest can be really popular can be seen in the almost universal popularity of Mr. Winston Churchill. The late Arnold Bennett once said that a certain Englishman was not deserved by England—he was a 'bit of luck'. Mr. Churchill is a 'bit of luck' for Britain and for many parts of the world where liberty with all its heavy responsibilities is still regarded as worth dying for. That is really the theme of this book, though its language is mostly of the patterns into which fighting falls and the conventions which are generally accepted as deciding the right to enjoy liberty.

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CHAPTER I

Sunset over Italian East Africa

'The student of these campaigns who bears away with him the two lessons that mobility, which gives the power of surprise, should be the chief aim of the organization of our Army, and that training, which gives the ability to manœuvre, will restore to infantry the offensive power on the battlefield which many in France believed it to have lost, will not have read them in vain.' *The Palestine Campaigns* by Col. A. P. Wavell (1928).

The campaign which completed the up-rooting of Italian power in East Africa was in many ways the most remarkable of which history has any record. The distances, the natural difficulties, the disparity between the forces and the speed combine to make it unique. If this has not yet been recognized it is in the main due to the very conditions that establish its supremacy. The five months' fighting over these immense distances involved a multiplicity of actions, few of which failed to be distinguished by a skill equal to their courage even when the actual numbers engaged were small. Speed, colour, daring, or humour would justify the claim of each of them to be put upon record and no doubt sooner or later they will find their place in the written word that remains. Here no more can be done than describe the broad outline of the campaign.

When General Wavell came to regard this vast area as a

zone for military operations he had to face a number of intractable conditions. The frontiers which Italian East Africa presents to the west measure about 2,500 miles; and an aeroplane flight from the north to the coast of Italian Somaliland would cover almost half that distance. The sea frontiers were about as long as those on land; and, in the whole of the vast area included within these limits, only the small plot of French Somaliland was not under the direct control of the Italian Commander-in-Chief at the time; and after the fall of France the French colony was at his disposal in all essentials. Within this area was concentrated a force of at least 250,000 men, well armed on the most modern lines, well supplied and well led. The Commander-in-Chief proved to be the most resolute Italian general who had yet been encountered.

In effect, the colony was an island within British territory, and the strategy for its capture was therefore clearly indicated. General Wavell had to set in motion a series of columns to develop a converging attack. This has a satisfactorily simple sound; but the conditions made it very far indeed from simple. Within the area of the colony there was every variety of terrain—flat featureless desert; dense, impenetrable scrub; tropical country; plateaux with a temperature that might severely test any troops; steep ridges that might be, and were, made as 'impregnable' as positions can well be; endless miles where it was necessary to carry every essential, including water. The campaign might almost be described as one of petrol and water. Moreover, neither of these existed in any quantity in the country which formed the British commander's base. The British are supposed to be the convinced or instinctive disciples of the 'muddle-through' policy. If there had been a trace of that in this campaign only disaster could have been the result.



1. *The Campaign in Italian East Africa*

General Wavell's human and material resources, at the launching of the campaign, seemed almost lavish. He had been condemned to exist for months with a tenth of his opponent's troops and a twentieth of his guns. The long period of minor warfare had been fought on a basis of a platoon to a battalion, with mobility to make up for his lack of numbers and material, and only stubborn courage and tactical ability as his last defensive line. Now, the conditions had changed; and, with some four divisions, he prepared to take the offensive against twelve or thirteen. In the north the 5th Indian division with the small Sudan Defence Force had been covering some 500 miles of frontier and holding off the decisive attack with a bold front and skilful tactical handling. For the Keren attack, this modest force was reinforced by the 4th Indian division which Wavell coolly brought some 1,500 miles from the scene of its brilliant success on the frontiers of Libya. Major-General Platt was in charge on this sector of the front; and, on the south, General Wavell had as subordinate Major-General Cunningham, the brother of the Admiral commanding the squadron based upon Alexandria. If General Platt's force seems exiguous, General Cunningham's may appear to be impressive. He had in all three divisions, the First South African division under Major-General Brink, the 11th African division under Major-General Wetherall and the 12th African division under Major-General Godwin Austen. He had, as a fact, never more than 20,000 infantry available, and through administrative difficulties, could never use more than three brigades in battle at a time. Thus it is clear that General Wavell set out to destroy some 250,000 troops with an infantry strength that amounted to about a seventh of that number. General Cunningham's guns never totalled more than sixty-eight.

The First South African division was the first complete division that South Africa has ever placed in the field. Moving north from Nairobi it concentrated at Marsabit about 120 miles south-west of Moyale which, after being heroically held by a company of the King's African Rifles, had to be evacuated, and at this time lay still in Italian hands. The two African divisions were concentrated about the Tana river, some seventy-five miles west of the frontier of Italian Somaliland. There, the winter months were filled with preparations for the offensive. Aerodromes were constructed; and the fighters kept the air clear of prying eyes and so preserved secrecy. Dumps of all sorts were accumulated at Gorissa. Troops arrived from the Gold Coast, from Nigeria and from South Africa. Mechanized transport was built up and huge petrol supplies accumulated. Petrol is, of course, the life-blood of armoured units and motorized transport; but in Kenya it played an even more extended role. Water had to be accumulated and distributed in places where it could conveniently be taken up by the various units, since it had to be carried in 44-gallon drums from the water-holes; but first it had to be made drinkable, and petrol pumps were used to force the well water through sand filters after petrol engines had assisted to increase the capacity of the water-holes.

The intense effort began to show results in December; and as January wore on the preparations were complete. They had to be very elaborate and as perfect as human forethought could contrive; for they were designed for a flying column which, unlike the rapidly moving units in European countries that could in general depend upon their swiftness carrying them to fresh supplies to renew their impetus, could look for no supplies beyond what was carried. The Colonel Wavell, who had written about mobility as the

parent of surprise and had as Commander-in-Chief recently proved his point, was now to depend upon it even more wholeheartedly. 'Speed is armour,' runs the maxim; Wavell was to require it to be *arms*, too, since he had decided to launch against a force better equipped than his own and many times larger the small mechanized column which from difficulties of supply and maintenance could never muster more than a few brigades.

On his left flank he had the First South African division, stretched out to cover some 400 miles. Its role was to threaten Abyssinia from the south and cover the left flank of the advance from Italian Somaliland. In front of it lay Moyale with 125 miles of waterless desert as a useful insulation and an escarpment that rises sharply to about 3,000 feet as a defence. General Brink had no intention of challenging that obstacle at the beginning of his operations; and, when he began his advance, he moved up to the north-west through Dukana and the water-hole at El Yiba. His route was mapped out to follow the water-holes. On his extreme left, the East African Brigade which formed part of his command moved up west of Lake Rudolf while the rest of the division, ably assisted by several companies of Abyssinian irregulars working under an Imperial officer, crossed the frontier east of the lake and entered the colony to the west and north of Moyale. Their first objective was Mega, a minor edition of Keren which was to prove so difficult a problem in the north.

All these columns were set in motion at the beginning of February, since it was the strength of Wavell's strategic conception that the enemy was to be confronted with troops moving in upon him from every direction simultaneously, with the difficulty of not knowing which to oppose. From the Italian point of view this was the worst way of looking

at the position. The Commander was possessed of such superiority in resources that, operating upon interior lines, he should have been able to take the columns in detail. The Commander-in-Chief was too cool to lose his head; but he made the fatal choice of fighting on the retreat. When it is admitted that ultimately his position was desperate, no excuse can be found for his complete reliance upon the defensive. If he had chosen to attack the columns in turn he might have thrown the whole plan into confusion and gained for the enemy the months that alone held any promise of relief.

The East African brigade worked round the west of Lake Rudolf while the rest of the division was making its way towards Mega. It had been broiling heat when the advance began, and under these conditions the advance dumps had to be arranged and water carried at times as much as 200 miles. They had a little brush for the El Yibo water-hole and then found that on the other side of the frontier there was no road. They were confronted by dense scrub through which they had to blaze a trail by means of the armoured cars. Direction was kept by moving on a compass bearing, with the assistance of the Abyssinian irregulars and occasional guidance from aeroplanes. At length the enemy roads were struck and the force moved upon Mega. This town was important because it was the centre from which radiated roads south-east to Moyale, north to Yavallo and north-east to Negelli. But it lay on a plateau about 6,000 feet high, surrounded by sentinel peaks rising to 3,000 feet from the plain. The tropical heat had now fallen almost to freezing point; and, as the troops were approaching the town, the rain began to fall and quickly turned the black cotton soil into a morass.

It is fortunate that in such circumstances the advance was being conducted on the blind side of Mega; for an approach

from the south the position had been elaborately prepared. It was a strongly fortified position; and, when the troops came into the open, they found the artillery ranges had all been noted, and so great was the difficulty of taking the town from the north that the natural line of approach must have involved the heaviest casualties. Every approach was laid with land-mines. Even when the guns had been man-handled up the steep peaks at dead of night, so that the reverse slopes could be covered with fire, the valley was found to be mined and wired. The men in the forward positions were for some days living on short supplies; but the engineers, acting as usual as the army's maids of all work, succeeded in clearing away most of the difficulties and at length, on February the 18th, the town fell to assault. With this success the South African division established themselves in a position threatening the Abyssinian lake district from the south. Moyale fell to the threat from the north. The roads to Yavallo and Negelli were opened up; and, on the west, the East African brigade were moving upon Maji and looking north-east towards Jimma which was to form so stout a centre of resistance.

Meanwhile the main attack upon the capital was under way. At the outset it could hardly have seemed that it was the capital that was threatened, since the two African divisions had to move due east towards the frontier of Italian Somaliland, which here runs almost exactly north and south. The advance was made in three columns. On the coast was a column of Nigerian troops, on their left a column made up of Kenya and Gold Coast troops and on the extreme left a South African column. On February the 2nd the three columns started off from the line of the river Tana and began a converging movement upon the town of Afmadu which lies about 65 miles across the frontier of

Jubaland. On February the 13th the Kenya column, in the centre, captured the town after a three-days' battle. The town had been prepared for defence and was heavily wired. As soon as it had fallen, the South African column and Gold Coast troops went through and made a forced march for the Juba river, fifty miles beyond. On this occasion the bait of a surprise attack was not the only inducement to make the best speed possible. The Juba river represented the troops' water supply; and delay meant suffering in the desert country. The Nigerian column had moved along the coast to Kismayu and a section of Kenya troops moved round from the north to close the line of retreat; but the Nigerians found the town evacuated. The Navy which gave support throughout the operations in Somaliland had served notice upon the Italians two days before by a heavy bombardment.

So the Juba river was reached and the hardest battle which the troops fought in the south developed here. The river line had been elaborately fortified. In its lower course it has a double bed and an island in the centre had been turned into a fortress. The Italians vastly outnumbered the attacking force and the river was here about 200 yards wide, with very thickly wooded banks. The Nigerians were on the coastal sector with the South African troops on their left and the Gold Coast troops in the centre opposite the town of Jelib. For two days the troops fought a hard engagement and then the position threatened to settle down into a condition of static warfare. This was very little to the taste of the British Command. Warfare of this sort is costly and profitless; and, moreover, the defence would secure time to regroup and prepare other positions. The Kenya brigade were, therefore, entrusted with the task of turning the Juba position. They were given a company of tanks and

armoured cars; and, moving to the north-west, they cut their way through the dense scrub and made a ford across the river. This was no mean feat; and it was accomplished by laying sandbags in the river bed and covering them with logs. The tanks were enabled to cross and then the column had to cut its way through five miles of dense forest. Some of the trees were as much as five feet in diameter and these had to be cut down to make a path. This done, a wide detour had to be made to avoid a marsh and then the column had to smash their way through more scrub. No assistance could be given them from the air as everything depended upon the surprise being complete; and for two days the troops fighting on the Juba had no knowledge of how the column was faring.

How well it had carried out its task was discovered when it suddenly appeared ten miles east of the river, astride the road that runs from Jelib through Brava and Merca to Mogadishu. In their new positions they dug themselves in and sent out tank patrols towards the rear of the Italian positions. This was the decisive moment. Under this diversion the Gold Coast troops forced the passage of the river north of Tovata island and attacked Jelib from the north as the South Africans were entering it from the south. The resistance on the Juba river was over; and so complete was the collapse that without any pause for consolidation the troops passed eastward towards Mogadishu. A column of Gold Coast troops now turned northward and, with the design of holding off an enemy movement from the north, advanced upon Lugh Ferrandi, took Negelli and reinforced the threat to the lake district already initiated by the First South African division at Maji and Mega. The left flank of the advance to Harar was now sufficiently protected.

The first night after the collapse of the resistance on the

Juba the coastal column reached Brava, ninety miles to the east. It was at this point that one of the lighter experiences of the campaign occurred. It was reported by aeroplane that a column of Italians six miles long was moving along the beach and there was some anxiety in the small body of Imperial troops; but when the pilot returned after a further examination with the news that the Italians were flying the white flag everyone breathed again. But there was no time to waste and no men to spare. Three non-commissioned officers were sent to collect the Italians and the column pressed on to Merca. As it was essential to control the landing-ground, so that the British fighters should be able to land at dawn and cover the next stage in the advance, the column rested that night at Merca and sent out a patrol to clear and test the aerodrome. The next morning the troops were in Mogadishu. It was February the 25th, barely a fortnight since the capture of Afmadu and Kismayu. The coastal column had covered over 250 miles and fought two battles, one of them on the Juba river, a very heavy one.

The first stage of the attack upon the Italian forces was now complete and a pause was necessary to prepare for the second and more hazardous. When the Italians had attacked Abyssinia they had marched upon it from two directions, from Eritrea and from Italian Somaliland. General Wavell had first to make good his position in Somaliland before he could embark upon the advance across the vast stretch of country that divided Mogadishu from Addis Ababa. He had already overcome a stiff resistance and taken many prisoners; and the rapid march upon Mogadishu had resulted in the capture of much material of all sorts. The supply system was now completely changed. Instead of depending upon the land communications across desert country the problem was very much simplified by conveying stores

from the Kenya port of Mombasa. The road to Harar, some 630 miles to the north-east, had now to be covered. On March the 2nd the advance had reached Villagio Duca degli Abruzzi and on the 6th Ferfer, across the frontier. Six days later they were at Dagabuhr, and on the 17th Jijiga was captured without difficulty, with a number of prisoners. In seventeen days the advance had covered 570 miles at an average speed of 33.5 miles per day. We should need to look far to find an advance of such a distance, maintained at such a pace.

The speed of the advance was made possible by the perfection of the staff work. The Nigerians who led the way could never have kept up the pace if the supplies, and particularly water, had not always been available as they were wanted. Careful reconnaissance kept the command in touch with the movements of the enemy and with those of the various columns, the leaders of which also used aeroplanes to communicate with their colleagues advancing in distant areas. When all has been said it cannot be forgotten that Marshal Graziani who moved up this road upon the Abyssinian capital in 1936 took ten days to cover eighty miles and yet he described his achievement as the 'march of the will and of iron'. It is true that he had to follow a track after leaving Gorrahei where now a good road runs; but he had only to face natives armed upon a plane which no-one could have considered European and General Cunningham's column faced an enemy superior in numbers, material and equipment. The morale of the Italians appeared to snap when they found themselves unable to maintain the Juba defences and between the river and the entry into Jijiga over 31,000 prisoners were taken. This, it will be noted, was more than the infantry strength General Cunningham ever had at his disposal at any given moment. At Moga-

dishu the advance had been so swift that it achieved complete surprise and the capital was full of stores.

Re-entry into British Somaliland

By this time another element of the British plan had fallen into its place. From Jijiga a road capable of taking light motor traffic had been constructed by the Italians before the war, with the permission of the British authorities, through Hargeisa ('little Harar') to Berbera, the capital of British Somaliland. On March the 16th a small Imperial force had taken this town from the sea with the assistance of the Navy and Air Force. The operation was skilfully planned and immediately successful. The naval vessels crept in towards the coast about midnight and at zero hour two landings were made at carefully selected points. One, to the west, was entrusted to picked Indian regiments supported by engineers and artillery and the other, some distance to the east, was carried out by Somalis and Arabs. The main attack from the west quickly overcame the resistance and the Somali-Arab force was free to enter Berbera along the shore. A little after nine o'clock in the morning the operation was complete and Berbera was once again in British hands. A column was at once sent south-west towards Hargeisa and the Jijiga force sent another eastward to meet it. The right flank of the advance was thus cleared of potential interruption, though the Italians in British Somaliland no doubt thought more of the threat to their line of retreat than of attacking the British communications. The way was now clear for the resumption of the advance upon Harar. A stretch of difficult country had yet to be crossed; and experience showed that

the Italians had an eye for good defensive ground and their engineers the skill to take advantage of it. The approach to Harar had been well prepared for defence and Marda Pass had been thoroughly fortified; but the troops who had marched so far and so swiftly across Abyssinia had no mind to be checked when they were near the capital, and on March the 25th they carried the pass. Two days later they entered Harar and captured a number of prisoners and some guns. The white flag had been raised the preceding afternoon; and, on Thursday March the 27th, the town was entered and a great march had been rounded off. It was a day that will long live in the memory. Another column had begun to move in the west and on this day a small Belgian and British force entered Gambela, 160 miles to the west of Jimma, the centre of the lake district struggle. The day was notable also for the beginning of a naval battle in the Mediterranean that developed on entirely novel lines. But most of all it was memorable for the termination of the long struggle at Keren.

The Siege of Keren

General Wavell's strategy consisted of setting in motion a series of columns across numerous points on the frontier so that the enemy might be kept in constant perplexity and every advantage be taken of his vacillation. The southern thrusts were timed to coincide with another group operating from the Ṣudan. Kassala was the place where the Italians had made their most forceful attempt to invade the Sudan; and it was from this centre that the first and strongest Imperial column began its advance into Eritrea. This was the oldest of the Italian settlements and the natives

lived more contentedly under their rule and were more loyal. The Duke of Aosta had concentrated a considerable force of troops there and with their customary engineering skill the Italians had made the best of a terrain that offered opportunities to the defence.

The three places which the Italians had occupied in the Sudan were Kassala, Gallabut and Kurmuk and from each of these places were directed strong thrusts across the Italian frontiers. Even when the British were compelled to act upon the defensive, the various air contingents gave the main bases and flying grounds no peace; and this strong and persistent offensive played no mean part in preparing the ground for the eventual advance. With considerable daring a British Mission under Brigadier D. A. Sandford had secretly entered Abyssinia six months before and, setting up its headquarters in the heart of the Gojjam area, distributed arms to the natives and put them through a course of training. In some parts of the country it was already hazardous for Italian troops to move about after dark, except in force. The aeroplanes made life precarious by day and the Patriots by night.

All this by itself could do no more than shake the nerve of the smaller Italian detachments. The offensive depended upon more direct and forcible blows. Kassala was the natural point of departure for the main attack. From it there run roads that diverge across the frontier, one branch leading straight to Agordat through Biscia and the other leading to Barentu and then on to Agordat. The Fifth Indian division with the small Sudan Defence force, which formed the main column for the Eritrean operations, had also to provide a column from Gallabat and another from Kurmuk. It was on January the 19th that Kassala was entered. The Italians had slipped away the preceding day; and the British

force followed up rapidly and crossed the frontier three days later. Biscia, the railhead, was captured on January the 26th, and the main column advanced against Agordat while another was proceeding towards Barentu. After a brisk action at Agordat the town was captured and with it some hundreds of prisoners, many guns and much transport. Eleven tanks and fifteen guns were destroyed and many Italians were killed. The retreating enemy was at once followed up; but it took about three weeks to reach the defences of Keren, some forty-five miles to the north-east. The road had been skilfully blocked and thoroughly mined.

Meanwhile, Gallabat had launched another column to cover the flank of the Kassala advance. Gallabat and Metemma had faced each other across the frontier for several months, each from its position capable of rendering the other untenable but, until this moment, neither prepared to give way. At the beginning of February, however, it was found that Metemma was evacuated and the British column at once took up the pursuit along the Gondar road. Meanwhile, the troops attacking Keren were finding how difficult the position was. Keren lies in a gorge surrounded by hills, some of them rising to a height of 7,000 feet, many of them skilfully tunnelled and all of them bristling with cunningly disposed gun positions. It was at first thought that the attack might be delivered from two directions but the road to Arezza was found to be completely blocked. The holes and boulders in the river bed had brought the Italian transport to ruin; and at one point were found 300 motor transport vehicles, many field guns, standing wheel to wheel across the valley, and much war material abandoned by the Italians in their flight. As this alternative proved impracticable a column was set in motion on the other flank. Crossing the northern frontier at Karora it made its way

southwards through Alghena. Another detachment was landed at Marsa Taklai and moved down the coast. But in the end it was sheer invincible courage won the day; and the northern columns, which played their part in diverting part of the garrison, were held off at the critical moment. The Fifth Indian division had been reinforced by the Fourth for the advance but, in spite of this, General Platt could never muster more than half or a third of the numbers ranged against him. What an apt exposure of the mechanical school which seeks to reduce battles to mathematics! Instead of the attack commanding three times the number of 'units of force', they could never muster more than half of those of the defence. It cannot even be said that the defending troops were of poor quality. They numbered about 40,000 and included some of the finest of Italian regiments, including the Savoy Grenadiers and Alpini.

To add to the difficulties, the temperature persisted in a tropical mood; and under such conditions the British troops had to manhandle guns up steep peaks, to hold positions gained by daring feats in the darkness against a hail of grenades from higher peaks, to meet the blast of machine-fire from hidden galleries and fight on without, or with only intermittent, supplies. For six weeks the struggle fell back upon siege conditions. For the last week the battle never appeared to die down at all. On one day the Italians delivered seven counter-attacks. They appeared determined to hold the position at all costs. Incredible deeds of heroism were performed by the Indian troops, astounding feats of endurance by all; and when fatigue and strain had almost worn the Imperial troops out they were still found capable of a final forty-eight hours' attack. Keren fell, on March the 27th, and the troops who took part in that epic struggle may well be proud to number it among their battle honours.

Many prisoners and much material were captured at Keren and the retreating Italians were pursued along the road to Asmara. The troops who now occupied the heights of Keren kept up a steady artillery fire upon the road and the aeroplanes assisted to harass the retreat; but the Italians made good their escape and found time to arrange numerous obstacles in the path of the pursuit. The British had about 15,000 troops engaged at Keren and the severity of the fighting may be gathered from the fact that the Fifth Indian division lost about 2,000 killed and wounded which was four-fifths of its total for the whole campaign.

Asmara lies about sixty or seventy miles from Keren by the road which rises steadily some 3,000 feet as it winds its way through the mountains. It had been prepared for defence and every advantage was taken of the natural opportunities it provided. Yet, only four days after the fall of Keren, Asmara surrendered. The mechanized force at once went in pursuit of the retreating Italians. The Gondar road was found to be blocked beyond immediate repair. It had been constructed with the fine engineering skill of the Italians and cut into the side of a steep mountain. It was easy to blow in so precarious a shelf and difficult to get it into shape again for rapid transport; and the whole of Wavell's strategy was poised upon the swift unremitting pursuit. From Agordat onwards, as well as across southern Abyssinia, the speed of the advance had been maintained so that the Italians should have neither time to concert nor ability to execute the counter-attack which alone could have saved them.

The eastern road to Dessie was also a tribute to Italian road-making; but it was still in working order, and the pursuit was pressed along it while another force was exploring the position about Massawa, the Red Sea port which had

been the main enemy naval base. The advance towards the south did not lack its humour or its irony. A squadron of mechanized cavalry, numbering no more than a hundred men, at one point came up with a large body of Italian Colonial infantry in advance of the demolitions on the Gondar road. They were evacuating a small town which had been the headquarters of the brigade. In the street stood thirty motor vehicles heavily laden and about to move off. The British squadron called upon the Italians to surrender and they were invited to lunch to talk the matter over. An officer described how the Italians gave them so luxurious a lunch that, after the more than spare conditions under which they had been compelled to fight, they were amazed. The lunch over, the lorries were found drawn up headed towards Asmara, each with an Italian officer in charge; and the squadron took them back with 600 prisoners. The moral of this incident is plain.

Massawa surrendered on April the 8th after the Italians had sunk the ships in the harbour; and, apart from the port of Assab with its aerodrome, the Italians had now no other outlet to the outer world. From the beginning of the operations the number of prisoners taken in Eritrea amounted to 41,000, of whom 15,000 were Italians. When the size of the Imperial force is remembered this must seem astonishing. It was, in fact, a further proof of the moral ascendancy which the British had gained over the enemy. Before the surrender of Massawa the mechanized column had reached and passed through Adowa; and, by the middle of the month, were at the mouth of a gorge six miles north of Amba Alagi. This position was a second Keren. A mountainous knot, its peaks and ravines had been sown with defence works; and its approaches mined and wired. Its natural strength had caused it to figure in every expedition

since the time of Napier; but it was a name of ill-omen for the Italians who had there suffered a defeat by Menelek.

The Capture of Addis Ababa

By this time, too, General Cunningham's force was approaching from the south. Harar was entered on March the 27th. The Nigerians who were leading the southern advance had now to cover the remaining stretch of thirty-five miles to the important railway and road junction of Diredawa. There were extensive road demolitions between the two towns; but the Nigerians were at the end of their great adventure and brushing aside all resistance they reached it in two days. There they halted to allow the South Africans to pass through. From Diredawa the railway and a road suitable for traffic run to Jibuti, the port in French Somaliland; from it too the railway and a first-rate road keep company to Addis Ababa, about 225 miles to the east.

The Nigerians who had led the advance took Kismayu on February the 15th and entered Diredawa on March the 29th. In the intervening forty-two days they had covered 920 miles, at a rate of almost exactly twenty-two miles a day. They had been heavily engaged at the mouth of the Juba river and had brushed aside every attempt at a rear-guard stand across Abyssinia. Merely as a feat of endurance it is difficult to think of any parallel for such a march. When it is remembered that they had to be ever ready to give battle and had actually done so on several occasions, when allowance is made for the actual engagements with superior forces on the way, for the inevitable pauses at Mogadishu and Jijiga and for the obstacles encountered, particularly in the last stage of the advance, this march must be considered

a unique military achievement. At Diredawa they were only just in time to save the civilian population from disaster at the hands of deserters from Italy's colonial troops.

The South Africans gave the enemy no time to recover. They had already completely cleared the demolitions on the stretch of road between Harar and Diredawa, so that the supply column would suffer no impediment, and now, with the South African Air Force acting in advance, they pressed on towards the capital. They quickly reached Miesso on the railway and passed through on the way to the Awash river which cuts across the road and railway from north-east to south-west. At Miesso they were 180 miles from the capital and the white flags were fluttering from the houses as they passed on their way. The road was steadily mounting to the plateau of the capital, as it wound its way to the east. The Italians were abandoning stores, guns and ammunition in front of the advance. On April the 4th the South Africans were near the Awash river which runs through a gorge about ninety miles east of Addis Ababa and, although the bridges had been demolished, the river was crossed. On the following day, April the 5th, the advance patrols of the army were in the capital. The Union Jack was hoisted over the Italian Viceroy's residence on the following morning. The capital was handed over to avoid loss and bloodshed; and, although it could not be encouraging to go north, the Duke of Aosta, ordered to hold out as long as possible, had no other alternative. The Germans had retaken Benghazi and were nearing the Egyptian frontier. It was more than ever necessary for the Italians to detain as many as possible of the Imperial troops in Abyssinia.

Yet the Duke of Aosta could not have regarded the future without misgiving. He had been driven out of Keren, and the Indian division was pressing down from the north. Assab on the Red Sea coast, which might have appeared to offer an emergency exit, was guarded by a British destroyer. In the south-west the British columns were pressing up past Yavallo and Negelli. They were advancing on the west. Towards the north, however, there lay a certain area of freedom and the Italians retreated in the direction of Dessie where it was thought at the time they would make a stand. But the South Africans gave them no respite; and the trend of events seemed so obvious that President Roosevelt declared the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden open to shipping. The meaning of this was plain. Shipping of valuable supplies could now be sent direct to the Near East; and, as the Balkan campaign was in full swing, this was of considerable potential value.

It was on April the 14th that among the prisoners who continued to come in were General Santini, a brigadier, three colonels and forty other officers. Their plight explained their surrender. They were almost without food or ammunition, the rains had begun, and the sniping of Patriots was steadily increasing. By April the 18th the South Africans were in touch with the Italians about fourteen miles south of Dessie. Here the road was found to be damaged and a delay was necessary. For some days now the advance had been made against increasing resistance; but the enemy was being steadily pressed back. On April the 22nd South African and Natal troops dislodged the enemy from peaks on each side of the road covering the entrance to the Kombolcha Pass. The plateau on which Dessie lies was one of the main centres upon which the Duke of Aosta had counted on being able to stand. Yet in the stiff engagement

at the mouth of the Kombolcha Pass the enemy flanks had been turned and he had been flung back upon the town in confusion. A few days later Kombolcha, ten miles east of Dessie, was taken with some prisoners and guns. The road beyond, a twisting mountain road, should have been easy to defend; but the Italians had been fighting now for nine days on these positions which, strong by nature, had been turned into a great fortress, and although the Imperial troops were as usual gravely inferior in numbers they would not be denied. On April the 26th Dessie, which had been declared an open city, surrendered. The defensive position of Dessie, according to an official announcement in Nairobi, issued by Reuter, 'included seventeen localities, supported by seven forts and numerous strong points'. Some 5,500 Italian and 2,400 native prisoners with 93 guns and much other war material were taken. This was the heaviest battle in the southern column's advance and the victory was so complete that the Duke of Aosta flew off towards Amba Alagi leaving his troops to fall back northwards, hurriedly, on that strong point.

On May the 5th the Emperor of Abyssinia re-entered his capital, on the anniversary of the Italians' entry in 1936. He had been preceded by the Crown Prince and the Duke of Harar and, when he made his formal entry, he was received by his sons and General Cunningham.

The pursuit of the Italians from Dessie was continued; and gradually there developed the fierce and actually the last battle of the Duke of Aosta. Since the middle of April the Indian division had been pressing in from the north on the position of Amba Alagi. By May the 3rd the South Africans had taken Waldia, fifty miles north of Dessie and reached the Ala Pass. Two days later they had reached Quoram, about the same distance nearer the Italian strong-

hold. A few days later Patriot forces took Mai Ceu, about fourteen miles south of Amba Alagi, where the Abyssinians had suffered a decisive defeat in the Italian campaign of 1936; and they were then less than twenty miles from the Indians attacking in the northern column. The road from the north rose to the Toselli pass, the scene of the destruction of Major Toselli's force by Menelek. This pass was about 10,000 feet high and south of it, in a series of hairpin bends, the road rose sharply another 2,000 feet. The square block of Amba Alagi overlooks the pass. From the lower slopes ridges radiate like the rays of a starfish; and the faces of these ridges were cunningly tunnelled, the galleries bristling with machine-guns and artillery. The rains had begun to fall; and the temperature on the ridges was very cold. The position, under the conditions, seemed almost impregnable and, indeed, the last approach to the fortress had occupied several bitter weeks' fighting.

The northern column had decided to feint at the Falaga Pass on the east, attack across the Toselli pass from the north and deliver their main assault from the west while the South Africans moved up from the south. The advantage of this plan was that it took Amba Alagi on its weakest flank, the fortress being best prepared for an attack from the north. It was surrounded by May the 14th and the last stage of the siege began. The feint from the Falaga pass fulfilled its role by distracting the defenders; and a heavy force was also diverted to hold the advance over the Toselli pass, so that when the attack developed from the west it made rapid progress. But even there the advance secured its success by heroic means. At one point a seven hours' approach march covering thousands of feet of mountainous ground through the darkness was necessary to place the Frontier Force in position for their assault at dawn. The

subsequent attack seemed to take the Italians by complete surprise; but the mist suddenly shut down and robbed the Indians of their success. It seems that the artillery of the South Africans turned the scale finally and, on May the 16th, the Duke of Aosta asked for terms. Three days later he surrendered with the honours of war. The 7,000 Italians filed past detachments of British, Indian and South African troops; and on the following day the Duke of Aosta with five generals and a number of senior staff officers surrendered. All the equipment had already been handed over, and it was stated that, during and since the battle, between 18,000 and 19,000 prisoners had been taken. The end of organized resistance was near.

The time-table of the campaign deserves a record. The Imperial columns left the Tana river on February the 2nd. Thereafter their advance was as follows:

February	10	Afinadu	200 miles
	17	Juba river	50 ,,
	24	Brava	95 ,,
	25	Mogadishu	115 ,,
March	6	Ferfer	220 ,,
	17	Jijiga	350 ,,
	27	Harar	60 ,,
	29	Diredawa	35 ,,
April	5	Addis Ababa	225 ,,
	26	Dessie	195 ,,
May	19	Amba Alagi surrendered	140 ,,
			1,685 miles*

The success of this campaign was due to excellent staff work, including the supply and maintenance, and to the

* As there have been several accounts of the distances all those given here have been carefully confirmed by space runner, and it is hoped that the percentage of error is slight.

skilful co-operation of the Air Force. It was always at work operating in close and direct support of the ground forces and, only in this theatre of the war, was it used as it was meant to be used. In France the provision of direct support was almost entirely lacking and the aeroplanes were used for the most part strategically, against distant objectives, when it was the direct support which could alone have provided relief for the sorely tried troops. In Libya and in Abyssinia that mistake was not made. But when all credit is paid to the excellence of the staff work and the skill of the Air Force, it must be recognized that it was upon mobility and training, as Colonel Wavell had so aptly foreseen in 1928, that the success turned. Without the supreme endurance of the finely trained troops the advance could not have been maintained and pressed to a successful issue.

The Battle of the Lakes

Various columns had been pressing in towards the capital from the west and south-west and the enemy still at large were now concentrated in the areas about Gondar, and the region south-west of the capital in the neighbourhood of the lakes of the Great Rift valley. The troops in the Gondar area were shut in within narrow limits; but those in the lake district were rounded up in a prolonged encircling movement which by this time had already made great headway.

The strategy of the campaign which crushed the remaining organized opposition in Abyssinia was essentially the same as that of the campaign which compelled the surrender of the Duke of Aosta. By a series of converging columns the enemy was bustled from one position to another, generally

in ignorance of whether his retreat would secure him a temporary respite or would carry him to the head of another British column and with the well-founded conviction that sooner or later he would be rounded up and defeated. The area over which the campaign ranged was greater than that of England and Wales and its position can be described, from the strategic point of view, as being the flank of the advance to Addis Ababa. It was for that reason that the First South African division crossed the southern frontier, on both sides of Lake Rudolf, at the beginning of February and for this reason too that, after the battle of the Juba river a column was sent against Dolo and on to Negelli. General Cunningham's flank had to be protected against interference and, in fact, no trouble came from that quarter.

The Lake campaign, however, only began in earnest after the capture of Addis Ababa. The South Africans had passed through the Nigerians of the West African Frontier force at Diredawa and the latter then went on to the capital and were launched into the Lake district to the south. A column of troops was sent due west along the road to Lechemti, another down the direct road to Jimma, the centre of the resistance. Two other columns advanced southward, west and east of the line of lakes. There were thrusts from the south-east, up the Negelli road and through Yavallo and Giabassire; and, far away to the west, the troops who had crossed into Abyssinia west of Lake Rudolf moved up the road through Maji. Across the western frontier of Abyssinia a column of Belgians and Sudan Defence Force troops advanced through Gambela and, farther to the north, there were thrusts from Kurmuk and Asosa which suggested to the enemy, driven westward by the movement along the Lechemti road, that the south would be a safer asylum than the west. There was still

another column which had an influence upon the battle of the lakes. A small force of Patriot troops was moving in the loop of the Blue Nile towards the capital through Dangila to Debra Markos.

There were numerous brisk and some heavy engagements in this campaign, there were humour and irony. The area had few roads and the rains turned the tracks into impassable morasses. It was in such circumstances that the campaign began to develop in early May. Until the fall of Addis Ababa, on April the 6th, it had been impossible to organize the attack from the north; and until this took shape the operations from the south were not pressed. In this sector the Italians held a strong position at Wadara and there the Gold Coast troops, advancing from Negelli on May the 6th fought a heavy action for two days. The rain fell in an opulent downpour and fettered the attempts to manœuvre; but the troops pressed their way through the dense scrub to carry out a wide encircling movement and the Italians retreated hastily. This was the fiercest engagement in the south of the Lake district and in its way it proved decisive. The Italians never stood to fight again. The Patriot column on the direct road to Jimma had now reached Abalti on the Omo river where they overran an outpost and captured eight machine-guns. Between fifty and sixty miles to the east two columns were converging on the land-bridge between Lakes Shala and Abaya which carries the road to the important centre of Soddu. The approach to this town was covered from the east by the river Billate. The most easterly column had reached Sciasiamanna while on the west of Lake Shala the other column, after an action at Bubissa and delay by floods, on May the 14th captured nine light tanks without suffering appreciable loss. The southern columns were now advancing

steadily upon Dallc. The Negelli force was near Adola and the Yavallo detachment was past Alghe and approaching Giabassire. These columns were little over 100 miles south of the Nigerians coming down from the north.

On May the 20th the column at Bubissa fought a brisk engagement at Goluto, took 800 prisoners with some guns and tanks and established a bridgehead across the Billate. The remnants of the 21st and 24th Italian divisions withdrew from the east of the lakes, crossed the land-bridge and gathering the survivors from Soddu fell back to the hill country west of Lake Abaya. The Negelli force had taken Hula with the commander of the 25th Italian brigade, 90 Italians and 1,800 Colonial troops and their advanced patrols were at Wando. On May the 22nd, two days after the Duke of Aosta had surrendered, Wando fell with 600 Italians and 1,000 native prisoners; and on the same day Soddu was captured. Here two Italian generals, 4,800 prisoners and a number of tanks and guns were taken. The clearing up east of the lakes was left to the Patriots and the British forces advanced upon Jimma. The Omo, lying to the east of it, was now in flood and the heavy rains slowed down the advance, which in any case could not be resumed until the road demolitions had been cleared up. On May the 27th General Cafarati, commanding the 21st Colonial division, surrendered to an armoured detachment; and 650 men, the remainder of the 16th Colonial division, were rounded up. The British force at Soddu by June the 1st had reached the Omo river and under its guns which had to be man-handled up the river escarpment a bridgehead was established on the Jimma road. In a few days the west bank had been cleared and 3,900 prisoners, 14 guns, 180 lorries and much other war material were taken.

The Italian officer commanding-in-chief in the neighbourhood on June the 8th appealed to the British commander to go to the assistance of General Pralormo who feared the attitude of the Patriot forces which had come up with him. A fortnight before, when he was in the hills south of Soddu, he had been summoned to surrender and had refused. Now he was in fear of his life. A patrol was sent to him and he surrendered with about 2,000 men. By June the 11th the columns from the north and south, in spite of the road blocks and the heavy rains, had made contact twenty miles east of Jimma and on the following day the patrols were within twelve miles of the enemy's headquarters. The last days of the Italians had arrived. From the south-west the column at Maji had advanced past Shoa Ghimira and were nearing Bonga, only fifty miles to the south-west. Under the increasing threat of encirclement, part of the Jimma force fell back to the north-west to join with the enemy detachment which was holding up the advance of the Belgian and Sudan Defence Force column on Gore. But in Jimma, the second largest agricultural colony in Abyssinia, the garrison had decided to surrender. On June the 18th fires were seen in the town as the petrol stores and motor transport were destroyed and two days later Patriot forces commanded by British officers entered Jimma and received the surrender of about 8,000 Italians, including a corps commander, two divisional commanders and eight brigadiers. The country east of the lakes and south of Soddu was by this time clear of the enemy. There were still a number of Italians to be rounded up in the west; but the fall of Jimma was the end of the battle of the lakes during the course of which over 30,000 prisoners, 100 guns, several hundreds of lorries and vast stores of equipment had been captured.

Organized resistance was at an end. Besides the troops scattered in the west of the country, there was also a small compact force in the Gondar area. The former were gradually rounded up, the latter left to surrender. Neither could do any harm, or, for that matter, any good. They had become an irrelevance. Together they amounted to less than four per cent of the great army with which the Duke of Aosta was to attack Egypt. To such a plight Mussolini's great colony had come; and on July the 22nd it was formally announced that 'the territories formerly known as Italian East Africa are now in the occupation of his Majesty'. By this time the General to whose name this campaign will form a monument had been transferred to India and the face of the war had changed.

CHAPTER 2

Recoil in Libya

Benghazi was entered on February the 6th and the tank battle to the south was over on the following day. The victory was complete; and, on February the 8th, El Agheila, the frontier post of Cyrenaica, was occupied. The whole of the province had been captured; and two days later General Sir Maitland Wilson was appointed Governor. It was this that seemed to set the seal upon the success of a campaign that few had the knowledge or the patience to appreciate at its just value. Prisoners captured, war material and supplies harvested, armies destroyed fail to carry complete conviction unless broad acres are added unto them. Acceptance of all equally depends upon faith in the written word; but somehow it is places that convey the authentic ring. All the world loves a cathedral city and it was on Benghazi that General Wavell's victory appeared to rest. It was for this reason that the developments of the spring months in the province produced so disturbing a shock. Warnings, quite plainly given, did not lessen its force, or prepare anyone for the event.

On February the 26th, not three weeks after Wavell's brilliant victory, an enemy reconnaissance armoured unit was encountered by the British patrols west of El Agheila. This post is 175 miles beyond Benghazi which is itself 440

2. *The Strategic Position of Egypt*

miles, as the crow flies, from the railhead and main British base of Mersa Matruh in Egypt. By road the distance between the centre of the British administration and the main base was perhaps 50 per cent greater. It needs no special knowledge to appreciate that the British position, short of a very powerful concentration of force, was safe only as long as it was unchallenged. The brush at El Agheila seemed nevertheless an affront and although the daring patrol was driven back, the fact that it was a *German* tentative made the offence worse. It was presumably an appreciation of the reaction that led the military spokesman in Cairo to declare that we should welcome the German troops, as it would enable us to get to grips with our main enemy!

It is difficult to think that the staff took this view or regarded the incident with the seriousness it deserved; for when, in a few weeks, the opportunity presented itself, they did not emerge well from the test. During March it became known that the Germans had contrived to land in Tripolitania parts, at least, of three armoured divisions. We had used the Sicilian Channel ourselves; but had never been able to deny its use to the enemy completely. At the beginning of March it was less possible to control the narrow crossing than ever, for the fleet was fully occupied in covering the transport to Greece of the British and Imperial contingents. This was not generally known at the time; and, in any case, warnings are ungrateful guests. As the month wore on there were other more congenial subjects to feed the interest. Keren and Harar fell on the same day. The battle of Cape Matapan lit up the Mediterranean. There was little room for misgiving.

Then on April the 3rd, like the explosion of a bomb, came the news that Benghazi was evacuated. On April the 7th Derna was recaptured with Mekili, fifty miles to the south-

east. It was in this neighbourhood that six British generals, two colonels and 2,000 troops were taken prisoner. The loss of these generals was a serious blow. Lieut.-General Sir Richard O'Connor was in charge of the operations in the Western Desert. Lieut.-General Neame was with him, in company with two brigadiers, when the small party ran into a company of German motor-cyclists in making a detour to avoid roads which were blocked with retreating motor transport. General Gambier Parry, one of the armoured corps experts, was taken, independently, at Mekili. Major-General Carton de Wiart made a forced landing in an aeroplane which fell into enemy hands. Critical operations suddenly deprived of most of the senior officers can hardly be expected to develop successfully and the advance pushed on to Bardia on April the 12th; and the next day fighting was taking place at Sollum, on the Egyptian frontier. The hasty at once concluded that all General Wavell's brilliant success was wiped out.

But it was the occupation of Benghazi that started the outcry and caused the dismay. The fact that General Wavell had destroyed an army of over 200,000 men, taking 140,000 prisoners and so much material that the Greek campaign was kept going on it, was forgotten. When Benghazi fell, the worst was assumed; and when General Rommel was held at the Egyptian frontier and Tobruk was found to be still in our hands, the verdict was not revised. It is far from clear yet what actually happened on the frontier of Cyrenaica. The first clash seems to have occurred at Mersa Brega where, through bad tactical handling, the German armoured forces 'defeated, dispersed and largely destroyed' the single armoured brigade which guarded the frontier. Mr. Churchill made it quite clear that the German force was not much stronger than the British it defeated;

and it seems to be established that General Rommel had originally no intention of going beyond Agedabia, a few miles to the north, on the coastal road to Benghazi. But when he found the force at that place in full retreat he took his fortune in his hands and, with daring and skill, went ahead.

The initial setback could not be retrieved in a moment; but the 'vexatious and damaging defeat'—to use the words of the Prime Minister again—was not so bad as it seemed to a public which had become accustomed to regard General Wavell as synonymous with victory. Tobruk, where the command might have preferred to halt in the advance, but for the chance of completing the defeat of Graziani's army, was held, and the 2,000 prisoners who were taken in the rearguard actions between Derna and Mekili were only half of them fighting troops.

In the perspective of the war this unpleasant little setback could not rank high though it rankled much. In armoured warfare in the desert swift changes are the standard rather than the exception. If General Wavell had not destroyed the Italian army in Libya he could not safely have undertaken the offensive in Abyssinia where Cunningham's column had already captured the capital and was on its way to Dessie. Wavell had left behind at Tobruk a force which was to harass the enemy communications continually and play an important part in bringing the advance to a halt. It is clear that the enemy did not at first understand the role or the strength of Tobruk; and as he grasped its implications he was driven to attack it with increasing desperation. On April the 13th an attempt was made to reduce the position by an attack with infantry and tanks. It was beaten off and the position restored. Four days later another attack was delivered when 25 officers and 767 men,

mostly Germans, were captured. A few days later the attack was renewed with no better success; and on the 21st the Australians, in two raids, took nearly 500 prisoners. An attempt to test the strength of the enemy concentration farther east was made by landing a strong patrol at Bardia from the sea, and not all of the men concerned could be taken off.

It seems probable that the attacks on Tobruk were intended to clear the way for the advance into Egypt, for on April the 26th three small enemy columns crossed the frontier, converging upon Halfaya Pass. Light mobile patrols harassed the advancing troops who penetrated about six miles across the frontier and there halted. General Rommel was not prepared to launch his columns towards Mersa Matruh while a formidable force lay on his lines of communication and on the last day of the month he made another attempt to brush Tobruk from his path. On this occasion a fierce battle developed which did not die down for some days. The first attack was delivered at night and, with the assistance of a heavy force of tanks, the south-western sector of the outer perimeter of the defences was penetrated on a front of several miles. The fighting continued during the next few days, the enemy attempting to develop his advantage and achieving such success on May the 1st that a heavy counter-attack was launched to check the advance. With that the force of the attack appeared to wither. A number of tanks was destroyed and the enemy was driven back with heavy loss. Further attacks were delivered the next day and met with no better fate. On May the 3rd an attempt to launch a fresh force of tanks was broken up by artillery fire and preparations for another night attack were dispersed. For the moment the attack on Tobruk died down. It left 3,000 prisoners in the hands of

the garrison; but there was a considerable dent in the outer defences, and General Rommel concluded that he need anticipate no further serious trouble from that direction.

The Egyptian Frontier

On May the 13th five small columns made a reconnaissance in force towards the east. Advanced mobile forces checked them and on the following day the enemy withdrew to his original positions. On the 15th the British covering troops were sent forward to re-occupy the positions which had been in enemy hands since April the 27th. This limited operation was carried out successfully. Sollum, Halfaya Pass and Musaid were re-taken, and, at comparatively slight cost, heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy. The advance was pressed as far as Capuzzo and over 500 German prisoners were captured. The enemy counter-attacked heavily and during the next few days the battle ranged over the whole area between Capuzzo and Halfaya Pass. In the last week of the month small mobile columns crossed the frontier on a front of forty miles. They were harassed by the British forward troops and held up for a day and a night of fierce fighting; but eventually they succeeded in penetrating to Halfaya Pass and the British force withdrew.

The importance of this front was recognized on June the 9th by the appointment of General Sir J. H. Marshall-Cornwall as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief the British troops in Egypt. It was the day after the opening of the Syrian campaign and one of the first preoccupations of General Wavell's new subordinate was the relief of his western flank. General Marshall-Cornwall had been head

of the Military Mission to the Egyptian Army in 1937 and 1938, and he knows the Near East exceptionally well.

On June the 15th an attempt was made to retrieve the situation about Halfaya Pass by an operation which was more ambitious in design than was admitted at the time. The attack was carried out by British and Indian troops with the assistance of tanks and aeroplanes and quickly involved heavy enemy concentrations. At the end of the first day Halfaya Pass had been penetrated by the Indian troops, who could stand the intense heat better than the Europeans, and when, in the heat-mist of the second morning the attack was renewed the troops had pressed the enemy to the western outlet of the Pass. Meanwhile the advance had swept up to and past Capuzzo, in spite of repeated attacks by dive-bombers and a growing resistance on the ground. Reinforcements were drawn from as far as Tobruk and the Germans began to develop an encircling movement against the heads of the columns. Under such a threat it was decided to withdraw to the original positions.

This was one of the fiercest battles fought on the Egyptian frontier; and there can be little doubt that, although a good face was put upon the result it was, in fact, a disappointment. The losses inflicted upon the enemy were considerable, both in men and material; but the British force lost heavily also. In their withdrawal they had to meet the counter-attack of a strong armoured group and a novel running fight developed between the opposing tanks. They succeeded in taking back with them several hundreds of German prisoners; but the enemy was left in the end in possession of his original positions. The official account attempted to soften the disappointment by the claim that the enemy had been compelled 'to disclose his strength' and had suffered heavy casualties. But that was

not the whole of the design. There was a chance that the enemy would be compelled to draw so heavily upon his resources as far west as Tobruk that the strong Imperial force there could have emerged on the flank and rear and the whole of the eastern concentration be broken up. If events did not fall out that way, it is clear that the enemy strength had been miscalculated. Everything had depended upon speed; and when the Indians were no further on the first day than the western side of Halfaya Pass, the battle was over. An armoured detachment had dashed ahead even west of Tobruk; but the infantry had been held well to the rear and without infantry support tank advances must in the final account prove abortive.

Tobruk

The Germans, unlike the Italians, do not disdain hard work. They had provided for the possibility of attack by elaborately fortifying Halfaya Pass and defensive positions on the frontier. As the season wore on the scheme grew in complexity and an attempt was made to wall in Tobruk. They had good reason to resent the continued existence of this force on the flank of their advance to the east. The commander obstinately refused to be ignored. Numerous attempts were made by his troops to flatten out the salient which the enemy had driven into the outer perimeter of the defences and the position was tactically improved after a series of these tentatives. Throughout May, June, and July the troops strengthened their own position by skilful and vigorous attacks and raided deeper and deeper into those of the enemy. At times they cut several miles deep into those positions and, remaining in possession for a day or two,

created destruction, captured material and prisoners and only returned to their own lines when they had imposed on the enemy the necessity of a deliberate counter-attack. The plane of the fighting under such condtions gradually drifted back to that of the trench warfare that for a time seemed to circumscribe the art of war in the terrible years of 1915, 1916, and 1917; and the officers and men who had proved themselves adept in armoured warfare in the desert set themselves to study the older mode. British, Australian, and Indian troops became so skilled in raiding the enemy positions and were so persistent in their operations that it was the enemy who appeared the beleaguered and not themselves whose only communication with their base was by sea.

The conditions under which they were compelled to live make this the more remarkable. The Germans had transferred a considerable force of aeroplanes, including dive-bombers, to the Mediterranean; and one of the serious effects of the re-occupation of the bulk of eastern Libya was the use of many good aerodromes, at Berka, Benina, Derna, and Gazzala. With this advantage the enemy exerted himself to the utmost to make life in Tobruk intolerable. When Crete fell, further concentrations were available; and, for a period, the raids were not only daily but almost hourly. Grave damage was done to shipping in the harbour, fires were started, buildings destroyed. There were inevitable casualties, but the human body is much easier to destroy than the human spirit and, somehow, the troops remained full of life and full of fight. The sea communications were kept open. Letters arrived and were dispatched; and, instead of becoming more and more depressed and losing their heart for fighting, the troops cut more deeply and aggressively into the enemy positions during July. They

seemed, indeed, to have gathered a taste for living dangerously; but the effect they produced on the enemy was remarkable. In June and July heavy barrages were put down at the slightest sign of activity from the British positions. The weather was unbearably hot, to add to the discomfort of the conditions; but so important an influence was exerted upon the operations by the troops at Tobruk that they added a metaphor to the jargon of military description. When it was desired to suggest that the Germans might lose rather than gain by isolating Odessa, it was stated that it would become 'another Tobruk'.

Once again, in a war that seemed to be dominated by the machine, man its inventor asserted his mastery. Almost without defiance, casually, these troops, British, Australian and Indian, took the inferno of modern warfare as they found it and retorted its terrors on the enemy. For, of course, the Italians and German airmen did not have things all their own way over Tobruk. Even when the fall of Crete gave them nearer bases, they were not allowed to exercise the supremacy they thought to claim. The turn of the war that brought new strains to the Imperial position brought also new reliefs. The fine squadrons that had operated over Abyssinia began to appear in Egypt and to attack not only over Tobruk but also over all the flying-grounds of Libya, Crete and southern Greece. The port of Benghazi which had been described as useless to us and had been used by the enemy was the object of persistent bombardment. Tripoli did not escape the unwelcome attentions of the bombing aeroplanes.

The Libyan sector of the vast war front attracted little attention during these months. One desert campaigning season had passed and another not yet arrived. When

General Rommel reached Sollum but could go no farther the western frontier of Egypt sank below the threshold of interest. It had engrossed the attention for only a few weeks, and was overshadowed by other interests when it was seen that the failure on the frontiers of Cyrenaica was a tactical breakdown, bred of too much acquaintance with the Italians; as soon as it was grasped that General Wavell had the situation well in hand. For over six weeks the Germans had continued to announce that they would shortly be in Suez and the failure to do more than glance over the western wall of Egypt was a disappointment to their staff. But the vigorous skilful defence played its part in the development of the war. The position which for a moment had appeared to be crumbling had been made safe again, and if Rommel's armoured units could not advance neither could they withdraw without imperilling the whole Libyan position again. It had been hoped that their successes would relieve the pressure in Abyssinia, that the two sectors would interact, the prolonged resistance in Abyssinia to detain troops that might have crushed the Rommel spirit, and the Libyan offensive, in its turn, to withdraw troops from the east and save the Duke of Aosta from the humiliation of surrender. These hopes had perished; but it is scarcely to be doubted that more troops and material might have been sent to Greece if no Rommel had appeared on the western horizon. Reinforcements and supplies made their way to Libya more rarely after his advance to Sollum, and the position was regarded as sufficiently secure for General Wavell to continue his reduction of the resistance of Italian East Africa methodically and to carry to success a campaign in Syria. General Rommel refused to be ejected from eastern Libya and, retaining his foothold there, maintained another avenue of advance upon the Imperial base in the eastern

Mediterranean. Its value in the operative sense, apart from its role in pinning down troops and armoured units that might have been used elsewhere, remained for the future to interpret.

CHAPTER 3

Mussolini fails Hitler

The Greeks entered Argyrokastro on December the 8th and while pressing along the whole of the front in Albania attempted to exploit their victory on the left of the eighty-miles front. It was no easy matter, for in the tangled hill country the weather at times brought operations to a standstill. In the middle of the month the hills were swept by a blizzard and the soft snow lay deep in every depression. It was in such conditions that, on the extreme left, the next advance was made. Between Santi Quaranta and Valona lies the small coast town of Chimara, a little more than half-way along the coast road to Valona, the obvious objective on this part of the front. In this sort of country advances had to be made by yards and it was only after several weeks' pressure that it fell on December the 23rd. By this time Klisura had been held precariously for so long that its fall was expected at any moment. If the slowness of the advance seems remarkable, its skill and gallantry and its continuance should not pass unrecognized. In Albania Greece was challenging a Great Power whose resources were vastly superior and whose claims to military might were second in range only to those of Germany. The positions which fell into the hands of the Greek troops were all elaborately organized and defended with a stubbornness

of which the Italians had no need to be ashamed. The one thing lacking to this defence was success.

During the first week of January the operations in the central and coastal areas were designed to loosen the Italian hold upon Klisura and Tepelene. Winter seemed to hold the whole area in its grip. Under cover of the roar of avalanches the Greeks moved steadily in towards Klisura and on to the heights beyond, the possession of which alone could make the occupation of the town practicable. When this massif, the Trebesini ridge, was seized, the Greek troops were able to move in. On January the 10th it was occupied, one of the most important successes of the campaign. It was on Klisura and Tepelene that the Italians rested the outer defence of Valona upon which their supply system depended, and it seemed that Tepelene could scarcely hold out long. It lay barely nine miles north-east of Klisura and the massif which commanded this village appeared to overlook it also. The Greeks, indeed, continued to press forward and on January the 18th captured about 1,000 prisoners, among whom were a number of officers, including the commanding officer of the 77th regiment, the 'Wolves of Tuscany'. These and a number of other units had recently been sent to Albania; and, towards the end of the month, a series of heavy counter-attacks was delivered over the whole front. The new Italian Chief of Staff, General Cavallero, had displaced General Soddu as Commander-in-Chief in Albania and determined efforts were made to retrieve the situation.

It was while this prolonged and persistent counter-offensive was in progress that General John Metaxas, who had re-organized the Greek Army and inspired it with his own unquenchable courage, died at his home, at the age of seventy. He had seen General Wavell, on the latter's visit

to Athens, only a few days before; and now, on January the 29th, he laid down the burden of governing his country that he had borne for five years. M. Alexander Korizis, the Governor of the Bank of Greece and a member of General Metaxas's Cabinet, became the new Prime Minister, and the struggle continued as resolutely as before. The fighting raged most fiercely between Klisura and Berat and continued into the second week of February without securing any success commensurate with the cost. It is clear that the advance from Klisura had to be checked if Valona were to be held securely and yet the country over which the struggle was at present moving was not of the sort to give the Italians an opportunity to use the material in which they were so much superior. By a striking irony they had begun to act as benefactors to their enemy. It was largely on their material, particularly transport, rifles and guns that the remaining phases of the campaign were fought. So much had been captured in Libya that General Wavell was able to strengthen the Greek equipment significantly.

After the long-drawn-out series of Italian counter-attacks, General Papagos took the offensive towards the end of the second week in February. The Italians had been fighting almost without cessation in bitter weather and broken country and it was as they were feeling the weariness of the appalling strain that the Greeks attacked. Though the fighting ranged over the whole of the front the main Greek thrust was in the direction of their greatest advance and its success may be gauged by the repeated counter-attacks that were launched to check the advance. Many tactically important points were captured in the hills, numbers of prisoners were taken and heavy casualties were inflicted upon the enemy; but when the time came to exploit the initial successes the weather broke. Heavy rains

and mist put an end to active operations and when the rain ceased high winds and snowstorms restricted the fighting to purely local operations.

Mr. Eden in Athens

On March the 2nd Mr. Eden and General Sir John Dill arrived in Athens. It had become clear, by this time, that Germany intended to intervene in the Balkan peninsula. Germans had already been identified in Libya and from movements in Rumania and Bulgaria it was evident that they designed to intervene in the eastern Mediterranean effectively. The mission of the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was to create a solid Balkan defence block, with British assistance. At the same time the Axis Powers had concerted other plans. Hitler and Mussolini had met in January and, after discussing their spring campaign, had announced their full agreement. It now appears to be clear that Hitler contemplated a swift and easy occupation of strategic points in Greece; and, in order that this should be possible, it was necessary for Mussolini to clear up the situation in Albania. It was just before his meeting with Hitler that Mussolini had appointed General Cavallero to take over the command in Albania and the Italian offensive was presumably his attempt to carry out Mussolini's part of the Axis plan. That having disastrously failed, and been succeeded by the Greek counter-offensive, a fresh attempt to redeem the situation was carefully prepared.

Officers who were captured in the Italian offensive stated that Mussolini himself directed it; and this may be true since it was the least successful and the most costly of many attempts to secure a success against the Greeks. Before the Greek troops had occupied Klisura they had seized control of the Trebesini range which overlooks it from the north-west. Klisura could not be recaptured or Tepelene held much longer while that range remained in the hands of the Greeks. It commanded the southern stretch of the road leading to Berat and overlooked the ground up to and beyond Tepelene. At its highest point over 6,000 feet, it was of great tactical importance. The offensive which began on March the 9th was directed along a front of about twenty miles. The most powerful attack yet delivered in Albania, it was launched under cover of an intense bombardment that embraced the greater part of the Albanian front; but the main force was directed against a sector measuring a little over two miles about the northern end of the Trebesini range.

From the twenty-mile front of Tepelene to the north there stretch four roads to the south-east. It was along these roads, on one of which stands Klisura, that the attack was delivered. The Italians employed some seven divisions, but from the first nothing seemed to go according to plan. The Greeks had been fighting almost continuously for over four months and throughout the winter, yet they were ready and eager to meet each fresh wave as it rolled across the hills. They had already inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy but now they seemed to be presented with exceptionally easy targets. The fierce offensive raged for a full week and left the ravines littered with enemy dead. When, on March the 16th, it was abandoned five of the Italian divisions had been completely disorganized by their losses.

Many of these, moreover, were among the most famous in the Italian Army. The 3rd Alpini division which had broken through at the beginning of the campaign and was approaching Metsovo, with the chance of a strategical success in sight, had to be withdrawn owing to the number of its casualties. This was the third occasion upon which it had been reduced to ineffectiveness as a fighting unit. The 59th division which had been in Albania little more than a fortnight had also to be withdrawn. The Sardinian division lost between 40 and 50 per cent of its effectives. The 38th division lost so heavily that it had to be replaced by the 47th division during the offensive. The 26th Blackshirt Legion, a specially selected unit of two battalions, lost very heavily and one battalion commander was taken prisoner.

In fine, this carefully mounted offensive which was to deal summarily with the Greeks suffered a serious defeat in spite of a few tactical gains. It is not particularly easy to identify the causes of the setback. The Italians had at this time 300,000 troops in Albania, possibly more. They were not driven to the makeshifts of the Greek Command. They had plenty of material and were adequately equipped. In so far as the Greeks were well equipped, it was at the expense of the Italian armies in Libya. The plan of the attack was not at fault. The Italians had made a serious attempt to pierce the Greek centre. It was a deadly intent that inspired the thrust, and the sequel need not be described. If the attack had been successful, the flanks would have been rolled up and the valiant Greeks have been flung in disorder over the Albanian frontiers. Three-quarters of the Balkan campaign might have been over, for it is the defeat of armies that matters; the occupation of territory inevitably follows. It cannot be said that the Italians had not allocated sufficient force to the thrust. Seven divisions for

twenty miles represents a density which might have struck General Wavell as a soldier's dream. One of his divisions in Africa had to cover a front of 400 miles and another 500 miles. What then was the cause of the failure? It can hardly have been lack of skill. Italy has generals who would rank with those of other Great Powers for competence, and the position in Albania had, in the larger sense, been static so long that they must have had ample opportunity to study it and frame their plans at leisure. On this occasion, it seems certain that Mussolini and several of his Ministers were present; and no incentive can have been lacking to General Cavallero to do his best. It can only be attributed to fighting quality. The Italians apparently did not possess it and the Greeks did. It has been seen how vitally this influences the situation. In Abyssinia the Imperial troops had never fought except at great odds.

Armies are designed for fighting and if they cannot fight they are merely an expensive luxury. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Italians were unable to fight well. It was their misfortune in Africa and in Greece to be confronted with armies that fight better. There are levels of military skill which appear to reduce fighting to a less essential role; but the subservience does not sustain examination. The Germans would never have won by mere skill. Their victories were founded upon skill *and* fighting quality. The Italians were inferior in both, and so, on March the 16th, after a week of bitter struggle they had merely ruined a number of divisions and secured no success of any importance. The battle died down for a few days and when it was resumed the offensive took place under conditions slightly less favourable to the Italians. The Greeks had not escaped scatheless from the week's fighting; but they had suffered less and they were able to improve their

positions tactically at certain points. They were reported to have entered Tepelene; but it appears that was a goal to be denied them finally. The resumed Italian offensive flamed out, died down and broke out once more. There were further heavy losses, a pause, and then towards the end of the month it was resumed. So heavy were the losses in the third week of March that, on the 23rd, the Italian Commander asked for an armistice in order to bury his dead. Then the battle broke out again. The Greeks on this occasion lost a tactically important hill but retook it in a strong counter-attack.

They fought magnificently during these weeks. They were heartened by the presence of Imperial troops, for, by this time, all the world, except the British public, knew that there were British and Imperial troops in Greece. The Italians had failed to turn the Greeks out of Albania and the campaign was drifting to a greater clash. Already its mutterings could be heard over the Eastern Mediterranean and one aspect of it was to reverberate over the world.

CHAPTER 4

The Battle of Cape Matapan

Mussolini's offensive in Albania was part of a plan which having failed to meet the original intentions had to be hurriedly adapted to a different design. At the moment it was impossible to see what was developing in this theatre of the war; and the extraordinary naval battle that took place on March the 28th in the south Ionian Sea appeared to lack a context. As we can now see it, the design of the spring campaign was shaped by many hands. The blundering moves of Mussolini had almost as much to do with it as the more cunning action of Hitler. The latter's original draft was ruined by the Italian failure in Albania and the attempt to salvage the essential part of it in Belgrade was disturbed by British influences. So it came about that British and Imperial divisions crossed the Mediterranean in early March and the enemy belatedly decided to challenge the communications with Egypt.

Long after the war is over the element of light comedy contributed by Mussolini will continue to raise a smile. The bombastic claim that the Mediterranean is the Italian Sea—*Mare Nostrum*—never conformed to the facts. The Italian Navy, on paper so much stronger than the squadrons which Britain could spare for the Mediterranean, rarely interfered with their freedom of action. It immobilized them at a time

when they would have been so valuable elsewhere. It assured some limited freedom to enemy convoys and somewhat restricted the British use of the Mediterranean. But its existence was so flagrantly ignored on occasion that the initiative rested with the weaker force. Indeed, the term 'weaker' can only be justified by tonnage and weight of metal; and in those directions the British squadrons were undoubtedly weaker.

The Bombardment of Genoa

In the early hours of Sunday morning, February the 9th, one of the most instructive of the incidents which showed up the hollowness of the Italian claims took place at Genoa. About this time it was reported that a German army was waiting in Italy for a suitable opportunity of invading French North Africa. The grain of truth in the rumour was that two or three armoured divisions had been concentrated in Italy and, as we have already seen, they succeeded in reaching their destination in Libya. There were sufficient military objectives in the naval base without attributing to it a role which it never had. The Ansaldo electric works, the main power station of the port, the dry docks, warehouses and harbour works, goods yards and railways, all of which were damaged and set on fire amply justified the attack which was extended by naval aircraft to Leghorn and Pisa. The battle-cruiser *Renown* and battleship *Malaya* with *Ark Royal*, the cruiser *Sheffield* and destroyers carried out the bombardment. The two first carry 15-inch guns and, altogether, over 300 tons of shells were fired on the targets. There was no attempt to interfere with the warships either by aeroplane or by the Italian fleet. The shore guns which had, at first, mistaken the bombardment for an air attack

and fired in the air did no damage and the sole loss of the incident was one aeroplane which failed to return from the raid on Leghorn and Pisa.

British submarines were active throughout the Mediterranean. Some of them penetrated to the northern end of the Adriatic and interfered with the shipping in what should have been an Italian sanctuary; and the Greek submarines at the other end of the Adriatic took their toll of transports. In little over a month about a dozen enemy supply ships were sunk, some of them of 8,000 tons. A number of these vessels were in convoys; but this did not secure them immunity. On one occasion *Utmost* encountered two transports in convoy. The decks were crowded with soldiers as the torpedoes struck and the violent explosions suggested that munitions as well as reinforcements were on board. At least one of these transports was completely destroyed. On March the 8th a more important prize was encountered. A cruiser of the *Condottieri A* class was torpedoed and sunk. These cruisers are of 5,069 tons, carrying 6-inch guns. One of them had already been sunk by H.M.A.S. *Sydney*. Italy had already lost a number of her submarines and destroyers and two days before the unnamed cruiser was sunk the submarine *Anfitrite* was destroyed in an attempt to attack a British convoy in the Ægean.

Indeed, by this time British and Imperial troops were in Greece with a considerable amount of material; and, apparently, it was only when a vast amount of transport had crossed in complete safety from Egypt to the Greek mainland that Italy woke to the fact, or was reminded by Germany that she had a navy. It was on the evening of March the 26th that an Italian force, after 'an extensive air reconnaissance', left its base in order to threaten the traffic and so, according to the Italian report, compel the British to

convoy in greater strength. It may be remarked that there is no point in this unless it is designed to carry out some project which will necessitate the immobilization of the bulk of the fleet elsewhere, or unless it is designed to take toll of the convoying ships. Clearly the plan was to interrupt the communications in the Eastern Mediterranean by threatening to make them precarious; but it must have been evident to the Italian Command that the threat was always present and it could not be made more imminent without taking risks for which, apparently, they had no stomach. It seems that, however bold a gloss was placed upon the operation, it was one of those ventures that could only succeed against a poor spirited opponent. Threats do not impress the brave; and one may fail as easily by attempting too little as by attempting too much. The Italians stated that the force which left their bases was composed of eight cruisers with destroyers and a battleship. In the battle that ensued there were identified three battleships, eleven cruisers and fourteen destroyers; in fact the bulk of the Italian fleet that could still take the sea was engaged.

The Battle

It was in many ways one of the most astounding naval battles in the history of warfare. It was planned as a formal fleet action, after the fashion of Jutland; it developed into an encounter battle in the night that was all over before it was fully realized it had begun. It included as many advances and retreats as if warfare had fallen back to the manœuvre mode of the eighteenth century. The Italians having all the love of their mentors for engaging only in superior force, were exceedingly coy about too closely

approaching the British main battle fleet; and the two forces would never have met but for the intervention of torpedo-carrying aircraft. From the way in which the reports were received and from the Italian communiqué it seems evident that there were two squadrons of enemy ships operating from different bases; and it is probable that what were seen by air reconnaissance at midday on March the 27th were the cruisers accompanying *Vittorio Veneto* which had left their base the preceding evening. The second squadron when it was discovered was apparently echeloned to port of the *Vittorio Veneto* squadron. It was the latter which was later encountered south of Gavdo island, south of Crete.

As soon as he heard that enemy cruisers were at sea, at midday on the 27th, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham, ordered the cruiser force to proceed to the south of Crete where he would be in a position to intercept them. Although the Italian cruisers then lay south-east of Sicily he concluded that they intended to act against his lines of communication which passed in the neighbourhood of Crete. He ordered steam to be raised in the main battle fleet and, in the afternoon, moved north-west to support Vice-Admiral Pridham-Whippell with his cruiser force. This consisted of *Orion*, his flagship, *Ajax*, *Perth* (of the Royal Australian Navy) and *Gloucester* with some destroyers. The Commander-in-Chief's force, the main battle fleet, comprised *Warspite*, his flagship, *Valiant* and *Barham*, the aircraft carrier *Formidable* and some destroyers. This was a very powerful force to deal with a few enemy cruisers; but Admiral Cunningham rightly guessed that the Italians would not risk their cruisers without adequate backing.

Gavdo island is about equidistant from Alexandria and

the south-east of Sicily and, about twenty hours after leaving port, the first Italian squadron was seen by air reconnaissance some thirty-five miles south of Gavdo. The cruiser force was then some forty miles to the south-east. The Italian squadron consisted of what was later identified as the most powerful and swiftest ship in the Italian Navy, the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, with six cruisers and seven destroyers, and it was seen to be joined by two more cruisers and two destroyers. How well justified were then seen to be the Commander-in-Chief's precautions. This Italian squadron, even without the battleship, was vastly superior to Admiral Pridham-Whippell's cruiser force; and, of course, he dare not risk a hit from the 15-inch guns of *Vittorio Veneto*.

It was now a little before eight o'clock on the morning of Friday, March the 28th. The Italian squadron was steering south-east. The British cruiser force was forty miles to the south and the main battle fleet ninety-five miles south-east of it. Admiral Pridham-Whippell changed his course to the north in order to make contact with the enemy and, this achieved a few minutes after eight o'clock, he turned about in order to draw the enemy on to the main fleet. It was the role that Beatty had played at Jutland. The cruiser force could not stand up to the Italian squadron but, a few hours away, was the main battle fleet anxious and ready to meet any force the Italians could send against it. After about an hour's steaming in this order the Italians apparently began to suspect that it would be imprudent to steam too far to the south and turned about. Their course was now set north-west, on a line that must take them out of reach of Admiral Cunningham. The cruiser force also turned about and for a space of about two hours the order of the two squadrons was reversed, the British chasing and the

Italians chased. At about eleven o'clock the cruiser force sighted *Vittorio Veneto* some sixteen miles to the north and once more turned to the south-east to keep out of range and draw the enemy squadron on to the main battle fleet. Anticipation and disappointment had been playing a merry-go-round in the British battle fleet; but, for the moment, all seemed well again.

About 11.30 *Formidable* launched a torpedo bombing attack. It was thought that a hit had been secured; and the main effect was to suggest discretion even to this very powerful battleship, for once more the Italian squadron set its course for home. For a short space the cruiser force lost touch with the enemy; but as it met the main battle fleet the prospect brightened and the whole force steamed after its prey. By this time the second squadron had been detected by aircraft. It was at 11.35 some eighty miles west of Gavdo island, the two Cavour class battleships, three cruisers and four destroyers were first spotted. The two squadrons together were numerically superior to Admiral Cunningham's total force; but the one fear the Commander had was the possibility that the enemy should not be brought to battle. The chances were against it; but some reliance was placed upon the torpedoes of the naval aircraft. About this time another attack was delivered on *Vittorio Veneto*, and a hit was claimed.But touch with the enemy was now lost and naval aircraft was sent to sweep the sea for them. They were located in the early afternoon and, in another torpedo bombing attack, three hits were secured on *Vittorio Veneto*. Blenheim bombers now took up the attack and hit two cruisers and a destroyer.

These appear to be of small account when measured against the damage to *Vittorio Veneto*. About four o'clock, when the chase had lasted eight hours, it was discovered

that the battleship which could steam 32 knots had its speed reduced to a half. This was a decisive blow. It was not merely that there was now a chance of sinking the battleship, though that would be a most gratifying event; it was the possibility of meeting the whole of the two squadrons, since it was certain that the cruisers and destroyers would slow down in order to give to the battleship the fullest protection. The cruiser force was ordered to press ahead and regain touch; but contact was not achieved until after two more torpedo-bombing attacks had been delivered, in one of which a cruiser was again hit.

It was shortly after ten o'clock that the British and Italian squadrons clashed for a few moments at close quarters. The British destroyers had been ordered to attack earlier in the evening and it was reported to the Commander-in-Chief, at 10.10, that an enemy vessel was lying damaged and stopped about three miles to port of the battle fleet's course. The vessel proved to be the heavy cruiser *Pola* and the battle fleet was turned to engage it. Three enemy cruisers were at this moment seen to be crossing the bows of the main battle fleet from starboard to port. They were then no more than 4,000 yards distant. A destroyer suddenly turned his searchlight on the leading heavy cruiser and the battle fleet opened fire. The enemy was taken completely by surprise and, after the first salvoes, the two *Zara* class cruisers were destroyed as fighting ships. Though they remained afloat until sunk by destroyers, they were reduced to wreckage. Italian destroyers tried to protect their cruisers by firing their torpedoes; but it was too late. The battle had begun and ended in a minute.

The battle fleet turned away to escape the enemy torpedoes and the immediate sequel is not clear. *Zara* and *Pola*

were sunk and the Italian ships apparently became embroiled with one another during the night. The Italians indeed claimed to have sunk a heavy British cruiser; but this appears to have been one of the fantasies of the night. Heavy gunfire was heard where no British ships were at the time and the full toll of the enemy losses will not be known until the end of the war. The Greek destroyers had steamed out as soon as a fleet action seemed possible; and had taken station to intercept the enemy if he should fly north to the Adriatic. But the chance was not granted them; and when the dawn broke the enemy had made good his escape. In the battle the Italians lost three of their most powerful cruisers, *Zara*, *Pola* and *Fiume*; each of them heavily armoured and carrying 8-inch guns. Another cruiser of the *Colleone* class, the *Giovanni delle Bande*, armed with 6 inch guns, was probably sunk. The large Italian destroyer *Vincenzo Gioberti* and the destroyer *Maestrale* were sunk and the *Alfieri* probably sunk. *Vittorio Veneto* received serious under-water damage. Some 55 officers and 850 men were picked up by the British ships and Greek destroyers and hundreds of others might have been saved but for the German dive-bombers. During the whole of the preceding day when active operations were in progress their intervention had been small and ineffective. As the Commander-in-Chief could not risk his ships he signalled to the Chief of the Italian Naval Staff stating the whereabouts of 350 survivors on rafts and urging that a hospital ship should be sent. He received a reply thanking him and stating that a hospital ship had left Taranto at five o'clock on the preceding evening. The Chief of Staff showed intelligent anticipation!

This was the first occasion in naval history in which by skilful co-operation between naval operations and attacks

by aircraft the enemy's speed was so reduced that a reluctant enemy was brought to battle, and it was also the first occasion in which such severe losses have been inflicted upon the enemy while the British forces were completely unscathed. Indeed, on reflection, this perhaps was the most astonishing aspect of the battle; for if the Italian cruisers had no chance of surviving the salvoes of the British battleships at such close quarters, it was this closeness that gave them the one possibility of inflicting damage upon the battleships. These were 8-inch cruisers that could have been kept at a range at which, powerless to strike a blow, they could have been sunk by the battleships. The cruiser *Exeter* with similar guns had inflicted heavy damage upon *Graf von Spee*; and *Zara* might have damaged and caused casualties on the British battleships if she had reacted to the occasion as quickly as they. The Italians were taken completely by surprise and they were given no time to recover. As a result of this battle the Italian naval power in the Mediterranean was decisively broken. While a ship floats there is hope for repair and recovery and it is for this reason that any attempt to sum up the actual strength of the Italian Navy at the time depends mainly upon conjecture; but at least it may be said that its battleship strength was, at best, halved and its two most powerful battleships had been disabled or sunk.

At the time this was of the first importance. The weaker the enemy naval power in the Mediterranean the smaller the chance of further reinforcements crossing to Libya and the more secure the communications between the land forces in the Balkans and their base in Egypt. The war was steadily drifting into new channels and the battle of Cape Matapan could not fail to have its influence upon the operations that were now preparing. Mussolini had once again

failed Hitler. He had not even contrived to withdraw his forces intact. On the other hand, Admiral Cunningham had once more shown that the British Navy is as supreme upon the sea as Hitler claimed his legions were on land.

CHAPTER 5

The Balkan Campaign

It is unlikely that during the war we shall learn what were Hitler's original plans for the spring of 1941; but it seems clear that they went astray. By the beginning of February it must have become obvious to him that Mussolini could not be trusted to wage any successful campaign; and yet, even if he could permit his partner to be trampled in the dust, some effective blow must be struck against the British position in the Mediterranean. This became the more imperative, the further the chance of a successful invasion of England receded. Unless some means could be found to strike against Britain militarily Germany's strategy for victory was reduced to attrition by sea and air. This was unpalatable to Hitler and, moreover, he had grave misgivings about its effectiveness. It was for this reason that, with the failure of Mussolini to fulfil any other role beyond that of providing laurels for General Wavell, he determined to intervene in the Balkans. He had made a beginning by gradually seizing the control of Rumania and it was that country's subservient leaders who first acclaimed 'the new order'.

Many people claim to be reasonable and peaceable when they mean that they can be trusted to act reasonably while they get their own way. Hitler might claim that he is not a

militarist, since he is quite content to occupy and rule territories without putting himself or them to the burden of war. Indeed he had reduced the undermining of countries to a fine art. He did not invent the process, as was sometimes mistakenly thought. It was not he, or even General Mola who invented the 'fifth column'; and the use of this term was one of the many grotesqueries of the war jargon. Without General Franco's four columns, to speak of a fifth is meaningless. It was not Hitler who invented 'Quislings'. In Napoleon's days the British Secret Service had an interesting list of the little corporal's sympathizers in England. Hitler merely turned these expedients into a fully organized policy and made it serve his purpose in place of military operations. He did not idly seize control in Rumania. That country occupies an eligible central situation in the Balkan peninsula. Itself open to pressure from Hungary, it is admirably placed to provide a base of operations against Bulgaria and to some extent, against Yugoslavia also.

It has already been seen* how carefully Germany's operations are articulated. It was not until he had occupied Austria that Hitler began his operations against Czechoslovakia; not until he had undermined that country's defensive system by the occupation of the Sudeten districts that he seized the rest; not until he had done this and thereby uncovered the southern flank of Poland that he moved against that country. So, with the control of Rumania firmly in his hands and his troops in the country, he began to bring pressure upon Bulgaria. His course was not difficult. Bulgaria had been an ally of Germany in the last war and had already been granted the southern part of the Dobrudja. If Hitler could so easily coerce a Rumania which he had dismembered for the benefit of Hungary and Bulgaria, these

* *The War for World Power*, p. 73.

countries could hardly have been expected to resist his pressure; and in January it became clear beyond concealment that Bulgaria was more than willing to fall in with his plans. This is not to say that it would not have been difficult to resist the German pressure which was, as usual, exercised at once on all fronts, military, economic, political and domestic. There were German troops not only on the Rumanian frontier but even at the Shipka Pass. The country had been economically a vassal of Germany for some years and her irredentist claims looked south and west as well as north. Indeed it seems probable that the position would have been made clear months before but for the admitted divergence of Russian and German interests in any movement which might threaten to disturb the existing control of the Dardanelles.

The position had become so clear in the first week in February that Mr. Churchill, in a broadcast speech on February the 9th addressed a warning to Bulgaria. 'One of our difficulties,' he said, 'is to convince some of these neutral countries that we are going to win. We think it astonishing that they should be so dense as not to see it as clearly as we do ourselves. I remember in the last war, in July 1915, we began to think that Bulgaria was going wrong, so Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Bonar Law, Sir F. E. Smith, and I asked the Bulgarian Minister to dinner to explain to him what a fool King Ferdinand would make of himself if he were to go in on the losing side. It was no use. The poor man simply could not believe it or his Government could not believe it. So Bulgaria, against the wishes of her peasant population, and against all her interests, fell in at the Kaiser's tail and got steadily carved up and punished when the victory was won. I trust that Bulgaria is not going to make the same mistake again. If they do the Bul-

garian peasantry and people, for whom there has been much regard both in Great Britain and the United States, will for the third time in thirty years have been made to embark upon a needless and disastrous war.'

That warning was sufficiently pointed and when, a few days later, Britain broke off relations with Rumania, it was made evident that she was in earnest. On February the 15th the British Minister left Bucharest. The situation in Bulgaria continued to develop; but an entirely new factor in the Balkans appeared on the day before the British Minister left Rumania. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Yugoslavia were received at Berchtesgaden by Hitler and Ribbentrop. The explanations of this meeting that were issued by the German Foreign Office invested the event with an unusual gravity. Germany wished to be assured that the Yugoslavs would not 'confuse the situation' 'in the event of fresh developments in the Balkans'; and apparently it required three hours' discussion to elucidate the position 'in the spirit of traditional friendship of the two nations'. This discussion must have been like the friendly discussion between a lion and the lamb it has struck down. Germany had engulfed Rumania and was in the process of digesting Bulgaria. What freedom of action was left to Yugoslavia? The great naval strategist Admiral Mahan had, some fifty years before, drawn attention to the fatal *tendency to take the word 'defence' too narrowly* and the history of the war was the aptest conceivable commentary upon that warning. The sole interest of Great Britain was that the various countries should preserve their independence; but one and all appeared to take this as synonymous with the defence of their frontiers. What would anyone think of the commander of a fortress who proclaimed and carried into action his intention of not attempting to defend himself until he was

surrounded and the assailants were at his gates? Yet that was a fair analogy to the policy adopted by one neutral Government after another.

Thoughtful British people were, about this time, much exercised by the attitude of Colonel Lindbergh and his 'isolationist' friends. It seemed to them sufficient justification of their attitude to insist that they were thinking of 'American defence'. Holland, in the same way, had thought of Dutch defence and had succumbed. Norway, Denmark and Belgium had thought of their defence and had passed under the harrow. The attitude of the Colonel Lindberghs of this world was the one thing Hitler needed; and to insist, as did some of his friends, that he was 'perfectly sincere' was so gross an irrelevance that it made thoughtful people doubt the sincerity of those who raised the defence. To talk of the 'sincerity' of a doctor, lawyer, mathematician or plumber, would be no sillier than to discuss that quality in a political adviser. Hitler battened on the 'sincerity', on the scruples, on the narrow conception of defence of his opponents. There can be little doubt of the sincerity even of the gangster; but the Lindbergh attitude applied domestically would have left the gangster in charge and the country in anarchy.

Yugoslavia had witnessed the German occupation of Rumania on about a half of her eastern frontier. She was apparently still 'sincerely' thinking of Yugosalvia alone as she watched the Germans riding into Bulgaria along the other half. Hungary and Italy covered the north and north-western frontiers. The Italian islands fringed part of her western frontier and Italian-occupied Albania cut into the south-west. She had been sincerely watching the noose being adjusted to her neck. It must be admitted that it is difficult not to sympathize with her in her plight. But the

line of safety lay in more shrewdness and strength and less of merely sincere selfishness. If Yugoslavia had assisted in the formation of a Balkan *bloc*, as Turkey desired and as at one time there may have been some chance of even Bulgaria joining, the position would have been entirely different. Safety lay in that direction and in that direction alone. But the rulers of Yugoslavia were content to allow the encirclement of this country to develop while making terms that their slavery should, if accomplished, be as little arduous as possible. The suggestion even of prudence about this policy must be exposed. No-one, at this point, could possibly doubt that Hitler's assurances were meaningless. The Yugoslav Government were not even facing the real problem.

It was while the world was recovering from the disturbance caused by seeing Yugoslavia walk deliberately, if unwittingly, into the German trap that Turkey signed a non-aggression pact with Bulgaria. By this time it was clear to everyone that Bulgaria had thrown in her lot with Germany and it was difficult to understand how Turkey, the ally of Greece and Britain, could sign a pact that appeared to tie her hands as to intervention in the Balkans. The Turkish newspaper *Yeni Sabah* wrote of the Pact as assuring peace in the Balkans and suggested that an attack through Bulgaria was prevented by it. All things are possible and it may be that Turkey really thought, as the newspaper suggested, that the Greeks could not turn the Italians out of the Balkans since by this pact the flank of the Greek Army had been closed. If Turkey actually believed that, the appropriate comment can hardly be congratulatory.

The pact was signed on February the 17th and three days later Mr. Eden and Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial

General Staff, were in Cairo. Britain intended to attempt to raise some obstacle to the enemy's over-running Greece. A series of consultations then began with the authorities in Ankara and Athens. The two British representatives were at Ankara on the 26th and two days later they were joined there by Sir Stafford Cripps, the Ambassador in Moscow. On March the 2nd they were in Athens and after consultations there returned to Cairo where General Smuts joined them. On March the 18th Mr. Eden met the Turkish Foreign Minister in Cyprus; and on the last day of the month Mr. Eden and Sir John Dill were in Athens again. It would be untrue to say that little came of these visits and discussions; but at least it is clear that they could not prevent certain Balkan statesmen viewing the problem of their country's defence 'too narrowly'. Yugoslavia would not join in the discussions and by the time they were concluded the situation in the Balkans had completely changed.

It had been suggested in Turkey that the pact with Bulgaria pointed the way to Yugoslavia; and, on February the 27th, that country signed a pact with Hungary. This was significant of the attitude of the Yugoslav Government of the time, for Hungary was then almost as much in Germany's toils as Rumania, though the fiction of independence was more credible. Then, on the first day of March, Bulgaria joined the Axis; and developments began to gather momentum. The next day German troops were in Sofia and on March the 3rd Russia rebuked Bulgaria. This event caused a momentary flurry in the international atmosphere; but it had no immediate sequel and was only a nine-days' wonder. Britain broke off relations with Bulgaria on March the 5th and when the British Minister, Mr. G. W. Rendel, arrived at Istanbul bombs were found in his luggage and two of his party were killed. A few days later, after a Yugo-

slav Cabinet meeting, four Ministers resigned and it was realized that the Government was about to take the plunge. It had allowed the Bulgarian situation to develop to such a pitch that the country was practically encircled. Apart from the Greek frontier and the Hungarian it had no free outlet on the world; and the northern frontier was only free for, and not from, Germany.

Three days after the Yugoslav Cabinet meeting Britain issued a warning. It was clear and definite; but it fell upon deaf ears. The Government was informed that it deluded itself if it thought the policy it was pursuing would be condoned by the British Government. But as the widespread protests within the country had been ignored, it is not surprising that the British protest met with no response.

The British Note was handed to the Foreign Minister on March the 24th and on the same evening the Prime Minister, M. Tsvetkovitch and Foreign Minister, M. Cincar Markovitch, left for Vienna, accompanied by the German Minister. The next day the Tripartite Pact was signed in Vienna and on March the 26th the two Ministers journeyed back to a suburban station of Belgrade. They were received by the Prince Regent who sent a message of thanks to Hitler. It was the latter who should have thanked Prince Paul since, with the Yugoslav signature, he appeared to have been granted what Ribbentrop's manœuvres had been designed to achieve—all the benefits of the conquest of the country without the time and casualties involved in winning them in battle.

Fortunately for the honour and good sense of Yugoslavia the Government was not left long in office to enjoy the credit of their success. At 2 o'clock the next morning the army deposed Prince Paul with the Government and proclaimed that King Peter, whose coming of age was due

in less than six months, had assumed full powers. A new Government was formed by General Simovitch. Air Force troops had already secured all the key points in the capital; and the King and new Government were enthusiastically received by the people. On March the 28th, the King was sworn in by the Orthodox Patriarch. An uneasy peace then settled down upon the country, except that the German Minister and German people received a hostile greeting in the streets. The King and his Prime Minister well knew what their action implied; but they had, at all costs, to gain time. Further classes were called up for frontier guard duties; but Germans and Italians began to leave the country. Even the Hungarians were recalled by radio. On April the 2nd the bulk of the German Legation left Belgrade. Two days later a German Foreign Office spokesman made a statement that did little to relieve the tension. On April the 5th all Yugoslav frontiers except the Greek were closed and on the following day Germany began her attack. It was opened, quite characteristically, by a German dive-bombing raid upon Belgrade, which, with Zagreb and Ljubliana, had three days before been declared open towns.

It is difficult fully to appreciate the heroism of the course taken by King Peter and his people because of the developing tragedy that overshadowed it. In retrospect we can recognize that their decision came too late to save either themselves or the heroic Greeks who had never shown a moment's hesitation. They had attempted to gain time by a policy which could not deceive the Germans since it commended them to those who repudiated the action of Prince Paul's Government. But time was essential to them. The mobilization and concentration of an army are extremely complicated operations that require time for their accomplishment. It is impossible, even for the most skilful staff

and the most highly organized nation, to change them in a moment. The mere act of mobilization may occupy any period from a fortnight up to five weeks; and the Yugoslav Government of King Peter had just twelve days to make their preparations for the enemy onslaught. Until General Simovitch came to power there had been no serious attempt to organize resistance, though a considerable number of divisions had been standing to arms for some time. The Yugoslav Army was ill-equipped for modern warfare and it is doubtful if there was adequate equipment for more than half the million or so who might have been mobilized. The soldiers were unmatched for valour but this was not the first occasion in which mere courage was pitted against the skilfully organized German machine. In Yugoslavia courage and endurance were expected to overcome not only the Panzer divisions, accompanied by fleets of dive-bombers but also to make good the complete lack of preparation against an attack by an enemy who never moves until he has thought out his plan to the last detail.

The result could have been foreseen from the forces engaged and the conditions under which battle was joined, and if it proved a shock to the vast majority of the onlookers it was because they were in complete ignorance of the facts. For its size Yugoslavia has an immense length of frontier and there could be no reasonable defence of the whole of the country. Any such attempt must collapse under the strain. All that General Simovitch could expect to do was to cover the vital south and south-east while methodically evacuating the north. It was to his clear interest to link his forces with those of the Greek Army and the Imperial divisions; but it is difficult to discover any recognition of the position and there was little time to concert a plan with the Allies. The tragedy was that Yugoslavia could not

fail alone; she must, in the circumstances, bring down Greece with her. Bitter as must be the fall of the valiant nation which had so nobly fought in the last war, how much worse it was that her collapse should involve the breakdown of Greece, the first country to defy the Axis successfully. It was not impossible, nor even impracticable to find a line in Greece which the Army, assisted by British and Imperial divisions, could successfully defend. While it seemed certain that Yugoslavia would give no help and might prove a weakness to the defence of Greece, General Papagos had concentrated strong Greek forces about Florina to block the Monastir Gap; but when General Simovitch took charge of affairs these troops were removed to the eastern strip of Greek territory, Macedonia, east of Salonika. It was reasonable to assume that more of Greece than before seemed defensible might now be held. How difficult it is to blame this revision of plans; but it was fatal, and not only were the troops east of Salonika uselessly sacrificed but the vital door of the Greek defences was opened. In a sense the entry of Yugoslavia into the war on the allied side was the cause of the fall of Greece. Yugoslavia not only failed to block the entry into the Vardar Valley; she did not even hold the Monastir Gap and, in depending upon her, the Greeks lost their one chance of maintaining their foothold on Greek soil.

The Disposition of the Forces

General Wavell was involved in one campaign, the conquest of Italian East Africa, when the call came to assist Greece; and he found it impossible to spare more than three divisions: two Anzac divisions and one British with an armoured brigade. The force totalled 57,757 and was made

up of 24,100 British, 17,125 Australian and 16,532 New Zealand troops. General Wavell took a risk in despatching even these troops across the Mediterranean and paid the price in Libya. In his speech of May the 4th, Hitler said that Churchill had made the 'biggest strategic mistake in history' by removing troops from north Africa after the defeat of the Italians; but, though this may have seemed reasonable on May the 4th, when General Rommel failed to make any headway from Libya the strategic nature of the mistake was less obvious. It is certain that the Allied plan for the defence of Greece was practicable. With the three Imperial divisions, the Greek Army should have been able to hold the country to the west of the Vardar valley; and there are a number of other lines upon which a stout defence could have been maintained. What actually happened could not have been foreseen and against it, therefore, no provision could have been made.

The bulk of the Greek Army was, of course, in Albania some thirty to forty miles from the frontier. The position had been attained by months of hard fighting; and a withdrawal could not be carried out at short notice, without grave danger and the abandonment of all the heavy equipment. The three divisions which had been removed from the neighbourhood of the Monastir Gap lay along the Metaxas line in eastern Macedonia. It was not intended originally to defend this part of Greece; but the adhesion of Yugoslavia made feasible what had before seemed impossible. Of the Yugoslav Army it is difficult to speak accurately. Fully mobilized it amounted to some thirty divisions and made a force of over a million men. It was in equipment that it was weak, and Prince Paul had attempted to placate the Axis Powers by agreeing to a disposition of the troops that offended against every military canon and was

completely unsuited to the defence of the country. General Simovitch had been compelled to accept a situation which left him with no more than a thin cover for the exceptionally long frontier and no real defence against the thrusts which he and everyone else knew would come from the east. His strategy, improvised under difficulty, was apparently to defend a wide arc from the Save west of Belgrade to the Kossovo Polje and fall back into the mountainous country of Montenegro. It is difficult to understand such a plan since every motive of prudence counselled a retreat towards the south, upon his Allies.

It is little easier to be sure of the German and Austrian order of battle. Hitler's account of the force mobilized for the campaign seems as little to be trusted as his report of the casualties. He said that thirty-one full and two half divisions were set apart; but that of them only eleven infantry divisions, six tank divisions, three full and two semi-mechanized divisions and the S.S. troops were used. According to this account some twenty-three enemy divisions were actually used. Even on this reckoning the enemy army was very formidable, since it was admirably equipped and perfectly trained. But that was not the secret of its strength. The small Imperial force was as thoroughly equipped as General Wavell could make it, and the Greek Army had been steadily strengthened by the material captured from the Italian armies in Africa. The strength of the enemy army was its unity of training and command, and the weakness of the Allied armies was the difference in their training and equipment and the fact that although General Sir Maitland Wilson, commanding the Imperial contingent, was under the orders of General Papagos the Yugoslav Army operated upon its own lines. It was this fatal disunity that led to disaster.



3. Germany's Balkan Campaign

The Balkan Campaign

The Invasion Routes

The main road into Greece from Bulgaria runs through the Struma Valley by the Kresna Pass which was covered by Fort Rupel. There was no direct railway communication between Bulgaria and Greece, although the line through the Struma valley ended at Petrich in Bulgaria and Demihissar on the Greek Macedonian railway lay only a few miles to the south. There are four other avenues from Bulgaria leading respectively to Drama, Zanthe, Komotine and (down the Maritsa valley) to Dedeagach. But the last three were not seriously intended to be held. Reduced garrisons were left in the small forts guarding the first two with orders to fight delaying actions. It had been decided in advance that western Thrace, the territory lying between the Turkish frontier and the Nestos river, should be evacuated; the process was under way at the beginning of March. When the Germans crossed this part of the frontier they found the bulk of the population had already gone. The main line of defence was the Nevrokop plateau, south of the Nestos river which runs north into Bulgaria. The forts covering the two passes into Greece were to delay the German advance; but it was recognized that Salonika might fall to an attack from the east. The divisions guarding the routes from Yugoslavia into Greece had, as we have seen, been transferred into eastern Macedonia, on the change of the Yugoslav Government.

From Yugoslavia into Greece there are two main routes, the Vardar valley which carries the railway line from Skoplje (Uskub), Nish, Belgrade and Central Europe, and the old Roman *Via Ignatia* which runs through the Monastir Gap to Salonika. This was the ancient highway between Rome and Istanbul. These two routes, and the whole of the

frontier between Greece and Yugoslavia, were supposed to be covered by the Yugoslav armies. But Yugoslavia itself was open to invasion from the east by the route between Sofia and Nish, the Kyustendil pass to Skoplje, the route to Stip (Istip) and the Strumnitsa Pass.

Of all these routes the two most important proved to be the Vardar Valley and the Strumnitsa Pass. The latter opened the way to the movement which turned the Greek defensive position in eastern Macedonia and began the severance of communications between Yugoslavia and the Allies. The Vardar Valley could not fail to be of the first importance to the whole campaign. It is the direct road to Salonika, it contains the main nodal point of the Yugoslav communications, and in it lies the town of Veles which stands at the head of the line leading to Monastir (Bitolj) and the only other entry into Greece. The key to the Yugoslav campaign was Skoplje. From it roads radiate in all directions; and its possession enables an army to cut the north of the country from the south. The loss of Salonika had been anticipated. Its capture from the east would not have proved disturbing. All that was necessary for the success of the Allied plans was the blocking of the Strumnitsa Pass and the immunity of at least the southern part of the Vardar Valley.

The German Attack

For reasons which have already been discussed neither of these obvious conditions was fulfilled. The Allies were not even given a breathing space. The German attack followed conventional lines. It is the custom of the German Staff to launch their heaviest blow at the outset and trust to its

impetus to secure a decision; and so, at 5 o'clock on the morning of April the 6th, the Panzer divisions with the close support of the Luftwaffe began the advance. In spite of every device the enemy made little headway on the Greek front. Even the parachutists were quickly rounded up or accounted for. A couple of fortified positions in the Rupel Pass were destroyed; but the main forts of Rupel and Ussita completely defeated the tank attack, in spite of the accompanying swoops of the dive-bombers. The Greeks lived up to their reputation in these engagements. It was on the Yugoslav front that the breakdown occurred.

The Yugoslav forces defending the important Strumnitsa Pass gave way under heavy pressure, a Panzer column crossed the frontier and by Tuesday morning had captured the frontier town of Doiran, so well known to British troops of the last war. They were then in the rear of the Greek positions, and were able to enter Greece by the corridor east of the Vardar Valley. They were held up for some hours by a small Greek mechanized column; but that evening they were well on their way to the Ægean. On the following, Wednesday, morning they were in Salonika; and the communications between the divisions in eastern Macedonia and the main Greek forces were cut. The final stripping of Salonika and the destruction of all installations had been completed; but, by this time, the whole position had been revolutionized. By their stubborn defence and fine discipline the garrison of the forts enabled some of the Greek units in eastern Macedonia to escape by sea; but they could not hold up the tide of the German advance. Already the Germans were in Skoplje and Nish, and had begun to cut through to the west. On the fourth day of the campaign the Yugoslav armies were cut off from the Allies and the enemy was free to move through the Bitolj Gap.

The German reports had claimed the capture of Dedeagach and Xanthe; but these were never intended to be seriously defended. The Greeks had resigned themselves to the surrender of the country east of the Nestos and this involved being cut off from Turkey. This part of the German victory was a barren success; and so much that was vital to the Allied plan had been won that the confusion of the imaginary and the real seemed inexplicable. By April the 9th the Germans had passed through Monastir and, advancing westward from Salonika to Yannitsa, had begun to impinge upon the British positions.

The conditions which led to the heavy though fruitless battles of the Imperial troops now began to take shape. General Wilson with two Greek divisions and the Imperial units had taken up a strong natural line of defence running roughly parallel to the Lower Vardar, some forty miles to the west. With its right resting upon the sea near Katerini the front ran through Veria and Edessa to the Yugoslav frontier, a distance of between sixty and seventy miles. Away to the west the main Greek forces were holding a line of about eighty miles across Albania with their left resting upon the waters of the Strait of Otranto and their right on the Yugoslav frontier some forty miles from the Greek frontier. Between these two strung-out armies lay about fifty miles of the mountainous southern frontier of Yugoslavia pierced about half-way by the Monastir Gap. This vital stretch of country was held only by Greek mountain guards. East of the British line was a British armoured force engaged upon demolition work and harrying the heads of the enemy columns wherever they were encountered.

At the end of the second day of the campaign it was evident that the Yugoslav army had met with disaster and the

threat to the Allied position was obvious. It became necessary to strengthen the force guarding the Monastir Gap and a small reserve consisting of a machine-gun battalion and some medium artillery was formed near Amintaion, south of Florina. General Mackay, with an Australian brigade (less one battalion), an artillery and an anti-tank regiment, later joined this small force with his divisional headquarters. The armoured force by this time had fallen back to Edessa, behind the Australian division and was placed under its orders. Such was the position when the Germans advanced through the Monastir Gap on April the 9th and appeared south of Florina. During the whole of this and the following day the Germans were heavily engaged by General Mackay's force which inflicted many casualties upon them. It is clear that these encounters had a vital character that could hardly be appreciated at the time. If the enemy could not be held at Amintaion it was obvious that the whole line would have to be withdrawn unless General Wilson was to risk being outflanked. On May the 4th Hitler said that two Panzer divisions, one mountain division and the Hitler Bodyguard alone were used against the Imperial force; but three other divisions were identified in action. About Amintaion, however, it is certain that the small Imperial detachment was temporarily blocking a vent through which a vast German force was pressing, and General Mackay had no chance of holding up the flood. It is, indeed, remarkable that he was able to check its advance for two days.

The Monastir Gap is a flat stretch of country about fifteen miles wide through the mountain range which rises several thousand feet on each side. At the north end lies Monastir and at the south Florina. Through it runs a single track railway and a road which splits into two branches five

miles south of Monastir, and both lead to Florina. It was this wide vent that the small force blocked successfully for two days. It then withdrew behind the main Imperial force which was taking up a new line. The new front rested on the sea south-east of Mount Olympus from whence it ran north-west to Servia, south-west along the Aliakmon river and then north-west along the high ground to the west of the plain of Kozani. General Mackay's force fell back down the Kozani valley and the armoured force withdrew to Grevena, on the left rear of the position. The retreat was not carried out undisturbed. An armoured brigade had to fight a series of heavy rearguard actions to cover the withdrawal. The weather was bitterly cold and it had to meet, under the worst conditions, a situation which might easily have become critical. The first German tanks were checked by a minefield; and when the infantry advanced in solid masses across the Amintaion ridge they were decimated by a battery of British guns firing over open sights. The retreat was successfully covered and the incident which was by no means exceptional is worth remembering in view of the attempt by Hitler to minimize the enemy losses.

The two Greek divisions were holding the high ground along the Kozani plain, on the flank of the Imperial position. They were very heavily engaged by the enemy and suffered such severe casualties that they almost ceased to exist as a fighting force. The Imperial forces holding the front from the sea to Servia and along the Aliakmon river were also hotly engaged but were able to take heavy toll of the enemy in the Kozani valley. But, the flank being now endangered, General Wilson had to face another withdrawal. The Imperial force was now compelled to depend upon its own resources. The Greek divisions could help no further; and the rest of the Greek Army lay beyond the

Pindus mountains where the Germans were threatening its flank. The new line which General Wilson proposed to hold lay south of Kamia and involved a long retreat under pressure. The left flank was covered by an Australian brigade at the Kalabaka railhead. The centre was held north of Tirnavos by a New Zealand brigade. In both positions the units were able to cover the withdrawal without much difficulty. But it was otherwise on the right flank. The Germans were attempting to penetrate the Peneios gorge, south of Mount Olympus, to the Larissa road. On April the 15th the eastern entrance of the gorge was held by a small New Zealand force; but it was attacked by a greatly superior enemy force and driven back. The next day this force was made up to about brigade strength by the addition of two Australian battalions. What was at issue was the safe withdrawal of the right flank of the Imperial force and the small Anzac detachment held up two German divisions in the gorge and, though suffering heavy losses, assured the safety of the retreat.

By the 20th the Imperial force had reached its new position on the Thermopylae line. The last stages of the retreat had been hampered by almost continuous bombing. Withdrawal inevitably deprived the troops of assistance from the air since aerodromes had to be abandoned at each stage; and what the Royal Air Force lost the Luftwaffe gained. At Thermopylae the Imperial troops were only some thirty miles north of the Gulf of Corinth. To those on the spot the trend of events could not be ignored. Indeed it is not too much to say that when the Imperial force was compelled to abandon its position on the Amintaion ridge it was clear that, short of some entirely unforeseen development, all was over. The Allied armies could not keep together; they could not exist apart. At this moment it must have seemed

the most bitter of ironies that if only the Greek armies had been much less successful in March they might now have been able to hold up the enemy onslaught. The great difficulty was that the main Greek armies were standing some thirty to forty miles from the frontier when the Germans began to pierce the Monastir Gap and advance towards their rear. The Greeks began to fall back and the Italians, never so successful as when opposition has ceased, to advance. They occupied Klisura, the prize of so much heroic fighting, on the 16th; and, on the following day, an official broadcast from Athens described the struggle as developing unfavourably for the Greek Army.

It was not the Italian advance or the unpalatable withdrawal that gave the pessimistic tone to this broadcast; it was the German thrust through the mountainous country north-east of the Pindus. By the 18th this movement had made so much headway that the nature of the threat it involved was evident. That day General Papagos, reporting to the Cabinet, could not take a favourable view of the prospect; and M. Korizis, the Premier, committed suicide. Two days later, the German columns were through the pass at Metsovo and the Greek Epirus Army was in a grave plight. The next day the British Minister in Athens was handed a Note informing him that the Greek Army was in a state of exhaustion and, lacking much necessary material, was in no position to render any further assistance to the Allies. Under such conditions, it was stated, continuance of the struggle could only result in the collapse of the Greek Army and useless bloodshed to the Imperial Forces. The Greek Government therefore suggested that the withdrawal of the Expeditionary Force was rendered necessary by the circumstances and by their common interests. On the following day the Greek Army in the Epirus capitulated.

The Greek High Command in its communiqué on the capitulation announced that when the army laid down its arms the Italians had not succeeded in crossing the Albanian frontier.

Organized resistance had ceased in Yugoslavia five days before. After the capture of Skoplje, the army never had a chance of success, in spite of its heroic resistance. Hungary, with which country Yugoslavia had so recently concluded a pact, invaded from the north on April the 10th. Italy was attacking from the north-west. To complicate the situation further the Germans were fostering a separatist Croat movement; and the new government which had been granted no time to formulate a reasonable plan for defence could not cope with so gravely compromised a situation under the pressure of a German attack that was as skilful as it was forceful. The Hungarian stab in the back had its tragic context. The Prime Minister, Count Teleki, faced by German demands for action against Yugoslavia which he considered gravely dishonourable and was nevertheless unable to resist, had committed suicide on April the 3rd.

On April the 27th the Germans entered Athens; and in a short time the glory of Greece had been dragged in the dust. Even before the capitulation of the Epirus army a wave of defeatism had swept across the country. The Under-Secretaries for War, Marine and Air had, in the middle of April, given two months' leave to numbers of men not with their units and when the Germans had taken control of the country they found no difficulty in discovering a premier and supporters. General Tsolakoglu became Prime Minister and his régime was supported by Generals Pangalos and Gonatas, who announced their condemnation of the Greek Government for declaring war on Germany. On April the 23rd the King issued a proclamation stating

that he had been compelled to transfer the capital to Crete, and from there a decree had been issued dismissing six generals, including General Tsolakoglu, for failing in their duty and violating their oath, and three of them for signing an armistice without authorization. But Tsolakoglu, in an interview given to the *Borsen Zeitung*, stated that he 'and his colleagues of the Epirus army' had been convinced from the beginning that 'war against Germany was hopeless'.

Indeed, it is difficult to condemn wholeheartedly the capitulation of the Epirus army or the defection of these generals. They had fought magnificently against the Italians; and when the Yugoslav Army failed to hold the Germans in the Strumnitsa Pass and prevent them capturing Skopolje, everyone could see that critical days loomed ahead. General Papagos had shown the greatest moral courage at the opening of the campaign against Italy by allowing the enemy to advance into Greece while he developed his attack upon the opposite flank. It is impossible to understand why he did not withdraw from Albania as soon as it was evident that the Monastir Gap would be pierced. That was his only chance. Perhaps it was impracticable, as it would certainly have been most difficult, to withdraw in time. But, given the line in Albania and the impossibility of holding the Monastir Gap, the rest followed inevitably.

The Evacuation

On April the 22nd the Imperial forces had begun to withdraw. After the capitulation of the Epirus army the Germans had begun to work round to the flank of the rear of the Thermopylae position; and a New Zealand brigade had been withdrawn to a position on the pass south of Erythrai

in order to cover the withdrawal to the embarkation areas. On April the 25th the last of the forces holding the Thermopylae position withdrew behind Erythrai and began to embark from the Attica, Ergolis and Peloponnese beaches. The embarkation was a much more difficult operation than the withdrawal from Dunkirk. There, the main bases had been but a short distance away and it had been possible to give protection from the air. Here, the Egyptian bases lay at least 500 miles to the south-east; and adequate air protection was impossible. Vessels were attacked from the air and wounded men suffered once more; but the losses were much less than was expected. This operation alone would deserve a book for, in spite of all the difficulties, no fewer than 44,865 men were evacuated. Of the 24,200 British only 16,442 escaped, of the 17,125 Australian 14,157, and of the 16,532 New Zealand troops 14,266. Heavy equipment was inevitably lost but all the valuable lighter material was brought away. A considerable number of the men were landed in Crete to which island the Greek Government had retreated.

A wholly satisfying balance-sheet of the Balkan campaign cannot yet be drawn up. Hitler gave the German casualties as 57 officers and 1,041 men killed, 181 officers and 3,571 men wounded and 36 officers and 141 men missing. The casualties were reckoned elsewhere at between 50,000 and 60,000 men; and it has been suggested that Hitler obtained his more modest figure by wholly omitting the exceedingly high Austrian casualties. If the estimate given in Allied quarters is too high, as well it may be, that of Hitler is certainly very wide of the mark. But he had secured the whole of Greece apart from Crete, inflicted many casualties upon the small and very valuable Imperial force and had captured their heavy equipment, though of course every effort had

been made to render it useless. On the other hand it is certain that by May the 2nd when the evacuation was complete the German time-table had been seriously disturbed. The Imperial forces were by this time sweeping in on the rebel faction in Iraq. Crete was still being held and the appeals of Rashid Ali for help had to be ignored. The Yugoslavs had found time to block the Danube at the Iron Gate with barges filled with cement and there were guerrilla bodies still at large in the country.

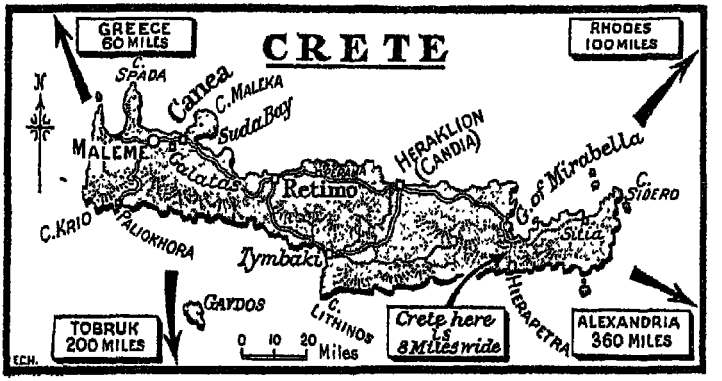
These advantages seem very small compared to the German overrunning of the Balkans; and they do no more than mark the inferiority of Britain in men and material and the reluctance of the neutral nations to stand together. The element of tragedy in the picture is the fate of the Greeks. This might have been very different if Yugoslavia had adhered to the Allied position in sufficient time to concert measures for her defence in common, or if, failing this, the Greek main armies in Albania had been withdrawn at the outset of the campaign. Bitter as that course would have been it would not have left them in an untenable position if the worst occurred, and if the best they could have recovered the lost ground. In many ways this was the most unhappy campaign of the war.

CHAPTER 6

Goering Captures Crete

By May the 2nd the evacuation from Greece was complete. The King with his Government had withdrawn to the island of Crete and on May the 5th an Order of the Day announced that they had placed all the Allied forces under the command of Major-General Freyberg, the Commander-in-Chief of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. The next stage of the German attack was recognized by this appointment. General Freyberg was a fighting general who had shown his mettle in the last war. Besides the Greek troops who had reached the island he had under his command when the attack began some 14,000 British, 6,450 Australian and 7,100 New Zealand troops. It was not a large force and it was not particularly well equipped; but it included some of the finest fighting material in the world.

The island of Crete is about half the size of Yorkshire and, with a length of 160 miles from east to west, varies in breadth from north to south between 35 and 8 miles. At its nearest it is only 110 miles from Asia Minor and only 60 miles from the Morea. The intervening space is occupied by the islands of the Ægean archipelago, the thirteen of the misnamed Dodecanese and the Cyclades. Geologically and strategically it appears to be the Mediterranean limit of the archipelago. The Italians were in occupation of the Dode-



4. The Issue in Crete

canese; and, even before the fall of Greece, the Germans had begun to invade the Ægean islands. Lemnos was captured by the daring of a small detachment on April the 25th, and by May the 11th the occupation of the northern and eastern Ægean islands was announced as complete. Crete then lay beyond, the most southerly limit to the German power and the most northerly foothold of the Allied.

Its retention by the Allies would lay the Grecian mainland open to constant air-raids and the possibility of seaborne expeditions which might secure the foothold that had been lost through a mistaken confidence in the possibilities of the Yugoslav armies and the failure to react with sufficient speed to the situation caused by their failure in the first two days of the campaign. But, without it, the full benefits of the occupation of Greece could not be reaped. The islands of the Ægean already shut in the Dardanelles and constituted a potential threat to Asia Minor; but Crete alone could round off the effective control of the Ægean and provide a centre from which to threaten the Alexandria base of the British fleet. Crete in Germany's hands would create a second bottle-neck in the Mediterranean and seriously hamper the operations of Admiral Cunningham's ships. It would close a door to the Ægean and open a means of assisting the troops in Libya. Lying only just over 200 miles from Tobruk it would assist on the attack upon that defiant stronghold and from it airborne supplies and troops might be landed in Libya or even in Rhodes, on the way to Cyprus and Syria. These advantages were real and valuable; but they did not involve a much improved situation for attack upon Alexandria by air. Rhodes is almost as near; and, whereas the retention of Crete, with Rhodes and the Ægean in the possession of the enemy, could be made most uncomfortable and possibly precarious, the capture of

the island could not materially add to the chances of air attack upon the Fleet base.

The disadvantages of leaving the island in our hands and the advantages of possession by Germany, however, were so obvious that it was clear an attack should be expected. At the moment everything suggested the advantages of *immediate* attack. The rebel clique was still holding out in Iraq though the Imperial attack was gathering way. If Germany were to respond to the appeals of Rashid Ali every day counted. Syria was still in the hands of the Vichy French and, therefore, at the disposal of the enemy. Rumours of an attack upon Cyprus were frequent; but no attempt was made. This is the best commentary upon Hitler's optimistic survey of his losses in the Balkan campaign. It is now known that in his address to the Party members on May the 4th he abandoned the idea of a decision during the year, and the three weeks' delay before launching the attack upon Crete can only be explained by sheer necessity.

The capture of the island raised some difficult problems. It was unlikely that it could be taken by a sea expedition. Germany and Italy had no illusions about the efficiency of the British Navy; and yet, without a landing from the sea, an attack could not be provided with heavy equipment and transport. It is possible to land small tanks by aeroplane and light guns were actually provided that way. But the difficulty of landing a sufficient number of troops and supplying them while the struggle was being fought out remained; and it is an extraordinary tribute to the originality and daring of the enemy that he calmly faced all the difficulties and risks and planned to invade by air. It is true that he hoped to assist by a sea expedition; and this part of the plan was no mere inessential adjunct. It was a funda-

mental feature of the plan and was, in fact, persisted in when the fate of the first attempt had proved disastrous. It was customary, after the event, to speak as if everyone knew that Hitler was to attempt the most novel operation of the war. The evidence of immense air activity in Greece, the creation of numbers of new airfields and the presence of heavy Luftwaffe concentrations were quoted as having shown the Allied command what they had to expect. But it seems more probable that, although some such expedient was expected, the reliance upon invasion from the air was a complete surprise.

It is still difficult to place limits upon what it is possible to do with supreme air power applied upon bold imaginative lines. During the war Oslo had been taken by airborne troops; but there the surprise was certainly complete, and in any case Norway was not mobilized or expecting any form of attack. Strategic centres had been seized by airborne troops in Holland though some part of the attack by air had failed. But, in both cases, the element of surprise could be relied upon, and neither country had an efficient or even numerous air force. In Crete, as the Germans well knew, they had to face the problem of Royal Air Force squadrons and resistance by an enemy mobilized and strong with at least heavier equipment than an airborne force could carry. They thought out the problem in characteristic German fashion, thoroughly, but with a touch of optimism; and the statements on the German wireless at the time showed that they intended to go to all lengths to capture the island.

The Royal Air Force had been raiding the German aerodromes in Greece during the third week in May with increasing strength; and then, towards the end, the Luftwaffe began to retaliate. Crete is as we have seen an elongated

narrow island and there are only two rifts of plain country between the gnarled mountainous formations. It was not, therefore, suitable for the creation of numerous aerodromes and fighters cannot operate without their airfields at hand. The long-distance fighter was at that time an adaptation of the (Blenheim) bomber or an improvisation. It was, therefore, obvious from the begininng that air support would depend upon local air superiority. The possibilities are not represented by the ratio of the distances from the aerodromes (60 to 360). It was not, that is to say, a question of how long an air concentration could maintain its protection against six times its number. In Britain the ratio had been little better than that, in August and September of 1940; but it had triumphed. The situation can only be appreciated when it is realized that the assistance of fighter protection, in the circumstances, was governed by the all-or-nothing principle. Either the fighters could operate over the distances or they could not appear at all. In the actual circumstances this meant that if the fighters could not maintain their position on the Cretan airfields the troops would be entirely without protection.

If the decision to defend Crete was, in the event, a sort of gamble, it was at least not taken without a careful weighing of the odds. Mr. Churchill had said that it would be defended 'to the death'; and this misled many people into a wrong conception of the situation. It is the fact, and it cannot be too often repeated, that the final determinant of victory is *morale*. There are no such things as impregnable positions. There are only positions which, for some reason or other, one side has determined to seize, and the other has not resolved to defend, at all costs; and the paradox is that with such a temper the cost is generally much smaller ultimately, and frequently immediately, than that which is

entailed by mere defence. The Prime Minister's statement led many people to believe that, cost what it might, the position would be held; and it is far from certain that such a decision would, if implemented, have resulted in a vital check to the enemy. It was taken to imply, of course, that the type of attack and the weight of it had been carefully considered and the appropriate measures taken to withstand it; and it must be recognized that the actual result hung in the balance until the last moment. It was, as many of those most competent to judge said at the time 'a near thing'.

For the sanity of our outlook on the war this must be appreciated. A great deal of criticism would have been impossible if the point had been fairly taken. When it was actually suggested by an Australian newspaper that it is imprudent to attempt to hold positions which one cannot be certain of holding, the point was completely ignored. Wars would not occur on such terms except upon the basis of some form of self-hypnosis; and, of course, for Britain which *had* to fight on the retreat for some time because she had allowed Germany to rearm while herself remaining unarmed until the outbreak of war, such a standpoint meant defeatism, and defeat.

The tactics of an attack by air had, like every other form of attack, been carefully thought out by the Germans. The air-borne division, like every other division (including the Panzer division) is an autonomous unit. It contains three infantry regiments each of three battalions. The battalions comprise three rifle companies, a machine-gun company, a light infantry company, an anti-tank company and an infantry gun company with four 75 mm. guns. It has an artillery regiment with three batteries each of eight 75 mm. mountain guns. The division has also an anti-tank batta-

lion, anti-aircraft machine-gun companies, reconnaissance and signal units, an engineer battalion, medical and supply units. The total strength of an airborne division is about 7,000 men. It will be appreciated that this unit is a very powerful striking force; and though it lacks transport it is capable of subsisting alone and acting alone. In attack from the air the parachutists' role is to prepare the way for the airborne divisions. Though they are at times intended to act by themselves, reconnoitring positions, destroying reservoirs, cutting communications and damaging power installations, in an attack by air they are designed to secure a foothold on an aerodrome, or ground suitable for landing troop-carriers, and when they see or provide that the troop-carriers can safely follow they signal to the local base. They are also supposed to signal if they encounter exceptionally heavy resistance so that dive-bombing and high-level attacks may clear away the obstacle. In Crete the troop-carriers were frequently crash-landed and gliders were at first used in great numbers. It was also noticed that many of the troop-carriers were the simplest transport machines, incapable of defence against attack from the air and simply designed to fly with a load. There were novel developments of an idea which was already ingenious and daring.

The Attack

The actual attack upon Crete began by intensive air-raids of the Luftwaffe. These reached their greatest intensity on May the 19th; and it was then evident that the possibility of maintaining aeroplanes of the Royal Air Force on the aerodromes was remote. The Battle of Britain showed, even if Dunkirk had failed to carry conviction,

that a numerical superiority in aeroplanes does not assure the dominance of the air. Over England it was seen time after time that a comparatively small force could break up the formation, prevent the attack and inflict heavy damage upon much superior concentrations. This was not merely a matter of the superiority of the British machines, or even the superiority of the British pilots' *morale*. It was due a little to both with a superiority in training in addition. But it is very necessary to realize that there are limits to the force which a well-armed unit of the highest *morale* can meet successfully. This does not in any sense weaken the contention that it is *morale* that will decide the war. Although this is perfectly true it is certain that there is a concentration of machines and men that will overwhelm the finest soldiers in the world. When this is recognized, it will be seen why the Luftwaffe attacked in such strength on the Cretan aerodromes and why it was that the Royal Air Force fighters had to be withdrawn. They suffered remarkably heavy casualties in the first attacks and would certainly have been wiped out if they had not been withdrawn.

The preliminary attacks of the Luftwaffe, therefore; justified themselves and paved the way for the ultimate success. It was their intervention that brought it about that for a few days the troops in Crete were entirely without air support and were never given the continual assistance which was necessary. This point was not sufficiently grasped at the time, and it was to a great extent decisive for the operation. The Stukas and Messerschmidts, the dive-bombers and the high-level bombers, prepared the way for the parachutists. The dive-bomber is a terrifying thing; but it was found here, as in France and Belgium, that with appropriate protection it is very vulnerable and, at worst, can be avoided. The machine-gunning by the Messer-

schmidts was a much more disturbing intervention; but of course neither could have controlled the situation so completely if there had been an abundance of anti-aircraft guns.

The attack began at about 2 a.m. on Tuesday, May the 20th, and was heaviest about the Canea-Maleka area. Apparently the capture of the Maleka-Akrotiri peninsula was the main objective. This peninsula lies like a head looking eastward, on the north of the island; and by its conformation it covers Suda Bay, the finest port in Crete. The military hospital between Canea and the neck of the peninsula was captured, recaptured and changed hands many times. It was apparently there that the incident occurred which led to the suggestion that German parachutists were wearing New Zealand uniforms. What seems to have occurred is that the parachutists, having taken the hospital, forced several of the wounded New Zealand troops in it to walk in advance of them. The Imperial troops soon learned how to deal with this inhuman expedient; and, indeed, although the landing of troops went on throughout the day and the enemy penetrated to the outskirts of Canea, they were rounded up and then killed or captured.

Landings continued until dark also at Retimo and Heraklion (Candia), the former capital. The day was fine with low clouds that afforded cover to the aeroplanes and it seems likely that some 3,000 men were landed. The men were armed with tommy-guns; but the aeroplanes also landed mortars and light artillery. If the defence is to be praised for its fine bearing under this novel and terrible attack, some recognition must be found for the persistence of the landings and the resolute bearing of the airborne troops. One of the Commanders who was present stated that the parachutists were not considered formidable. One New Zealand officer with 18 men killed 140 and took 27

prisoners. A battalion headquarters shot 30. The Germans feared the bayonet; and two New Zealand companies cleared the village of Galatas by its means, after dusk.

The day was full of incident and the balance of advantage was so clearly with the defence that over-confident statements were allowed to be circulated. The Imperial troops were all suffering from the strain of constant bombing and machine-gunning from the air; and although the enemy had landed among the defending troops at Heraklion and been rounded up and the aerodrome at Retimo was retaken by Australians and Greeks, they had made good a footing at Maleme aerodrome.

On the second day the arrival of troop-carriers seemed incessant; and at Maleme the small foothold was extended so that at night, in spite of everything the troops could do to dislodge them, the aerodrome was in their occupation though it was under British gunfire. At Heraklion the second day's attempt had achieved a better success and, although the aerodrome was still in the hands of the defence the Germans were established in the town. That night an attempt was made to weaken the force of the attack by heavy bombing raids upon the Greek aerodromes from which the Germans were operating. They, however, were engaged in a more ambitious operation. The harbour at Heraklion was in their hands and they attempted to land an expedition from the sea. This adventure fared very badly. The Navy were bound to suffer during daylight operations because they were compelled to move in the narrow waters about the island; but, during the darkness, they had things more their own way. One of the officers who was engaged in dealing with this attempted invasion stated so great was the destruction that the sea was full of Germans clinging to wreckage and shouting for help. The action lasted about

three hours, and during this time the 40 caiques, each carrying about 100 men, and small merchantmen, emerging from the cover of the archipelago made repeated attempts to reach the island. It was claimed that none of them succeeded; and it is highly improbable that, except by sheer chance, any Germans landed from the sea that night. The Navy unfortunately bought this success at a price.

The third day of the attack was decisive in a way that was not appreciated at the time. The German purpose was to secure a footing in a place that permitted development and then, having consolidated it, to extend their hold until they compelled the withdrawal of the Imperial and Greek troops. By the third day it was clear that they had secured a foothold at Maleme; and, although they were counter-attacked, with the arrival of further reinforcements they held the aerodrome firmly at night. On the following day more airborne troops were landed with light artillery and mortars, and they had made good their position at Maleme though the country east of the aerodrome was still in the hands of the Allies. Saturday and Sunday appear to have been mainly devoted to consolidation by the enemy; but there was much hand-to-hand fighting between Maleme and Canea. The dive-bombing was intense but the British artillery created great havoc among the German aircraft on the ground. It may have been in an effort to crush this element of the resistance that for some hours in the afternoon a mass bombardment was carried out upon the three main towns Canea, Retimo and Heraklion. After some months of experience of German methods this brutal attack did not cause the surprise or the horror among the British and Imperial troops that it did among the Greeks. The bombardment was said to rival that of Rotterdam and it seems clear that the aeroplanes crossed and re-crossed these

three small historic towns until they had reduced most of the buildings to ruins. At Canea many civilians were killed; and if fewer suffered in the other towns it was because they were able to take shelter in caves. The bombardment was no more brutal than many other German actions and no doubt it was considered justified by the blow it inflicted upon the *morale* of the inhabitants.

Everyone by this time was suffering from the mental and physical strain of the continuous bombing and machine-gunning from the air; and under cover of it the stream of reinforcements went on steadily. The effect of this was seen upon Monday, the seventh day of the assault, when the Germans felt themselves sufficiently strong to challenge the defence. Under cover of an intense air bombardment they attacked the British positions west of Canea and although they suffered heavy casualties they were able to penetrate the positions. The New Zealand troops delivered a counter-attack but were unable completely to restore the situation. By means of another attack during the night, the enemy, after some hours of bitter fighting, enlarged the penetration and made necessary a withdrawal to the rear. Having secured this initial success they delivered further attacks in the direction of Canea, under cover of more intense bombardment from the air. A further withdrawal became necessary and after sixty hours of almost continuous assault, German Alpine troops entered the capital. Serious morally, the loss was graver in a military sense since Suda Bay, the best port in the island, lies little more than a mile to the east. Indeed on this, the eighth day of the attack, the trend of events could no longer be ignored. That same day the Greek Commander was captured by the Germans; and, although British reinforcements stiffened the defence the next day, Suda Bay had to be evacuated and the defence fell

back to a line commanding it from the east. It could be maintained that, as long as this line was held, the use of the port could be denied to the enemy; but it was evident that the defence as a whole was crumbling. Italians were able to land at the eastern end of the island, and the garrison was on the way to being swamped.

German reinforcements continued to arrive steadily; and intense and almost unceasing dive-bombing compelled further readjustments in the Allied positions. But by this time the end was in sight, and the troops were trickling towards the south coast to embark for Egypt during the night. During these days Maleme was not the only place where the Germans were securing a foothold. Heraklion had gone through various vicissitudes. At one point the port was in enemy hands while the Allied troops held the aerodrome. Then the port was recaptured and only isolated detachments of Germans hiding in the rifts of the hills were left. It was difficult to dislodge these men; and, while Canea was passing into the hands of the enemy, small and vigorous battles went on forty miles to the east, about Retimo, and fifty miles beyond, at Heraklion. At this place the Imperial troops were at one time able to enjoy the German bounty as supplies meant for their troops fell into Allied hands. But on May the 29th the Germans were able to join up with the small bodies of parachutists who had held out at Retimo for eight days and Heraklion was finally captured. Alpine troops were in action in Retimo and to the south of the town. But now the withdrawal was in full swing and the troops were making their way as best they could to the embarkation ports on the south coast. By day the ubiquitous dive-bomber and high-level bomber sought them out and made movement possible only under peril of death; by night the broken ground of a strange country made pro-

gress almost impossible. At times the troops could only win their way to the coast after stiff rearguard actions. Under such conditions it is not strange that the casualties were heavy.

At the beginning of the German attack* there were some 27,550 British and Imperial troops in Crete, made up of 14,000 British, 6,450 Australian and 7,100 New Zealand troops. Of these 7,120 British, 2,890 Australian and 4,560 New Zealand troops were evacuated. The losses were therefore 47·1 per cent as against 22·2 per cent in Greece. Both in Greece and Crete the British suffered more heavily than the Imperial troops. Only 68·2 per cent of the British troops were evacuated from Greece as against 84·4 per cent of the Anzacs; and 50·9 per cent of the British troops were evacuated from Crete as against 55 per cent of the Anzacs. It is of interest to note that on each occasion the percentage of Australians evacuated was smaller than that of New Zealand troops. From Greece 82·7 per cent of the Australians were evacuated as against 86·3 per cent of New Zealand troops, and 44·8 per cent of the Australians from Crete as against 64·2 per cent of New Zealand troops. The percentage of Australians evacuated from Crete was smaller even than that of the British troops. These are not encouraging figures and they are not of course the whole of the loss suffered by the Imperial forces. They had less heavy equipment in Crete than in Greece and therefore they lost less in abandoning it. But the Navy lost the three cruisers

* The figures were announced in the House of Commons on August the 7th by the Secretary of State for War and as they refer only to the strengths '*at the start of the German attack*' they are, of course, incomplete. They do not, presumably, include the Marines, who fought so gloriously and lost so heavily in Crete. Out of 2,000 only 600 were evacuated.

Gloucester, *Fiji* and *York*, and the destroyers *Juno*, *Greyhound*, *Kelly* and *Kashmir* in attacks upon convoys attempting to land troops; and the anti-aircraft cruiser *Calcutta* and the destroyers *Hereward* and *Imperial* during the withdrawal. This was not quite so bad as the Germans claimed, but it was a serious loss. Moreover, although some 60 officers and 956 men were saved from the ships lost in preventing attempts to land and others from the *Gloucester* were landed in Greece, many of the gallant crews of these vessels were lost. They were not, of course, lost in vain; for apart from the possibility of a few ships succeeding in landing a handful of Germans, while the defence of the island was being maintained no troops were landed from the sea. The Italians entered the island only when withdrawal had actually begun.

On the other side of the balance-sheet must be set down about 5,000 men drowned and about 12,000 killed and wounded on the island. In addition to this, the Germans lost about 180 fighters and bomber aircraft and some 250 troop-carriers. By this expenditure they had secured the advantages of Crete and these, as we have seen, must by no means be minimized. But there is evidence that the rebel faction which attempted to hold Iraq for Hitler appealed to him in vain for the assistance which might have rescued them from the defeat by the Imperial forces, by this time already complete. That cannot be ignored. Upon the control of Iraq the Syrian operations marched to success and, without it, one may doubt if they could have been launched at all. The defence of Crete, even though unsuccessful, had also given General Wavell the conditions necessary to bring General Rommel's attack upon Egypt to a halt; and it is impossible that Hitler should have abandoned both Rashid Ali, with Iraq as his gift, and Rommel and the

chance of capturing the Suez Canal, if he had not been detained by the operations in Greece and Crete.

Nevertheless the loss of Crete was so bitter a pill that Mr. Churchill found it necessary to devote the greater part of his reveiw of the war on June the 10th to it. The episode aroused widespread misgivings largely for reasons that will bear little examination. A great deal of the criticism came from Australia and New Zealand. It appears to have been suggested that Britain was unnecessarily exposing Dominion troops. The actual figures have already been given; and, if they were completed, they would show an even greater disparity between the losses suffered by Britain and the Anzacs. It is quite possible that English people regard Australians and New Zealanders too much as their own brothers and take too much pride in their achievements; but, until there is some definite proof that they are wrong in so doing, they will continue to feel that their pride is ours and their burden ours.

The Prime Minister was able to make a good case that, on reflection, most people may regret had to be made. But apart from the Government explanation of the reasons for the defence of Crete and the evacuation, the novelty of the operations could not fail to provoke discussion. Marshal Goering gave point to it by congratulating the troops and informing them that they had proved the truth of Hitler's statement 'There is no unconquerable island.' The odd thing about this aphorism is that it has in it a greater measure of truth than most people realize, though it will not bear the application which he clearly intended. Most people accepted the latter which is an absurdity, and ignored the former which contains a most important truth. It is true that islands can be conquered from the air *if they are sufficiently shallow.* It has been easily accepted by the majority

of critics that it is not the defence of the aerodromes that was at fault but the lack of protection by fighter aircraft. But since these aeroplanes cannot operate except from near-by aerodromes, it is the neighbouring aerodromes we must first prepare. From the beginning, this seemed obvious to me; but I doubt very much if many have followed the logic of the analysis. When we faced the defence of Crete, we had three aerodromes on the island as against the eight German aerodromes ringing Crete in Greece. If we could not maintain the Cretan aerodromes against attack, we could not keep fighter planes on them; and the question of air support was decided. The question whether the aeroplanes which can be accommodated upon three aerodromes can beat off the attack of the planes which can be used upon eight is far from easy to decide. But it remains certain that without aerodromes aeroplanes cannot operate, and without *neighbouring aerodromes* fighters cannot work. The question of whether an aerodrome can be adequately protected by ground defence inevitably arises. The success of the anti-aircraft defence in England was so striking that this question cannot be brushed aside so easily as the critics thought; and it is the fact that, with the sublime illogic of our race, we fastened upon the subject of anti-aircraft guns while believing (or at least insisting that we believed) that an aerodrome cannot be defended except by fighter aircraft. As Mr. Churchill pointed out we had not and never have had sufficient anti-aircraft guns. It seems very difficult to expect anyone to grasp the elementary fact that it is impossible for a country in a year, working at half pressure, to equal the production of a nation almost twice its size which has been working overtime for six years.

The important point is whether an aerodrome can be made impregnable by ground defence; and this obviously

could not be tried in Crete. Otherwise the only way in which heavy air attacks can be countered is by the provision of a sufficiency of aerodromes, as well protected as possible, *at a distance which will give them immunity from air attack without making it impossible for the planes operating from them to meet the raiders in the air*. Hence a shallow island such as Crete is foredoomed to failure, if faced by a heavy air attack; whereas an island as big as England can do as it did in the summer of 1940. Marshal Goering clearly intended to suggest that England could now be considered as vulnerable to air invasion as Crete proved. This cannot seriously be maintained, not because we have fighters as our defence but because we have the aerodromes which can accommodate the fighters. The question of the protection of aerodromes cannot therefore be ignored. During the Battle of Britain the Luftwaffe attempted to destroy the aerodromes adjacent to the Continent. If they were not more successful than they were, this was due not only to the protection afforded them by fighters from more distant aerodromes but also, in no small measure, to the great efficiency of the anti-aircraft defence.

It was suggested that the Navy had been defeated by the Luftwaffe. General Franco went so far as to announce this as a fact. It is strange that soldiers almost invariably ignore the meaning and limitations of sea power. The Navy when compelled to operate in narrow waters approaches the limit of its legitimate sphere of use. Every weapon has such limits. It has become the fashion to deride the bayonet because it has a limit and cannot usefully be employed against the machine-gun. It would be as sensible to decry the machine-gun because it is useless against long-range artillery. A Navy immobilized in harbour is no longer a Navy; and, when deprived of the power of free manœuvre

and movement within the range of its speed, it tends to that condition. When the vessels of the fleet were compelled to act in narrow waters against the attack of powerful air concentrations and devoid of their protection, they were being used beyond legitimate limits; but it must be remembered that the 'blockade' has been maintained by the Navy for two years and, until it entered the Sicilian Channel under the concentrated attack of the German aeroplanes, it had suffered no loss from air attack.

What the Cretan episode established was the military possibility of invasion from the air; but it is ridiculous to imagine that the proposition is true under all conditions. While the heroic defence of Crete was being fought out, in the waters of the north Atlantic was taking place another episode which showed the Navy in its proper sphere of action. The battle-cruiser *Hood* was sunk and the British Navy avenged itself upon the Germans by sinking the newest of its battleships, *Bismarck*. In this episode the air factor intervened with decisive effect. But though the torpedo-carrying aeroplane must now be reckoned as part of the normal apparatus of the Navy, in the same way as the reconnaissance aeroplane, its limits also were clearly demonstrated. At the end it was a cruiser which sank *Bismarck*.

CHAPTER 7

America Mobilizes

'The enemies of democracy believed that democracy could not adjust itself to the terrible realities of a world at war. They believed that democracy, because of its profound respect for the rights of man, would never arm itself to fight. They believed that democracy, because of its will to live at peace with its neighbour, could not mobilize its energies, even in its own defence . . .' Mr. Roosevelt, at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, March 15, 1941.

Adapted to the special needs of his audience this is in fact Hitler's thesis. Mr. Churchill said the secret of his success was 'one by one'; this in the idiom of an older civilization would be 'divide et impera'. Each of these statements expressed but a part of the grand design for the conquest of the world. It depended upon a reading of the normal reaction of democracy to an unpalatable situation. Hitler had come to the conclusion that it would hesitate, temporize and allow itself to be attacked rather than face the necessity of war, *if there seemed any chance of escape*; and he knew that such an attitude left the same tremendous advantage to an aggressor as the permission to an army to site its siege train about a fortress. As a consequence, the 'isolationist' theory was the real issue of the war. It was not, of course, especially an American policy. It had its

adherents in Britain; and there was no more reluctance to face the issue of war in America in 1941 than there had been in Britain in 1938.

Conversion came to the United States no slower than it had come to Britain. The one thing that made British people impatient with the slowness and lack of universality in the American change was the fact that the theory had been exposed as suicidal in Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium. Each of these countries had expressed and shown in action its reluctance to recognize that a distant defence, in face of modern weapons, is the only sure defence; and had succumbed as a consequence. During the year 1940 the United States administration had shown its mind clearly; and, after the election, had sent Mr. Roosevelt back to the White House, Mr. Willkie, the Republican candidate, as loudly as the President, urged the need to give every possible help 'short of war' to the democracies who were fighting against Hitler. The most notable feature of this attitude is the reason adduced in its support. It was quite correctly stated to be *self defence*. 'The world has been told that we, as a united nation, realize *the danger that confronts us*,' said Mr. Roosevelt, in the speech already quoted. In his fireside talk on December the 29th, he had said, 'If Great Britain went down it is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun.' 'Every ounce and every ton of munitions must be sent to the defenders in the front line,' he went on to say; and finally, 'We must be the arsenal of democracy.' He could have justified every inference from the works of the American admiral, Mahan, who, the apostle of sea power, had fifty years ago warned his fellow countrymen against the peril of interpreting defence 'too narrowly'.

It is of importance to recognize that the basis upon which

the President and people of the United States proposed to help Britain was the principle of self-help. The difference between him (and the majority of people who followed his lead) and the 'isolationist' was not, therefore, one of loyalties, as the latter claimed but simply one of prudence and sense. It was on this ground that the 'Lease and Lend' bill was commended and the measure was the most remarkable expression of thoroughly enlightened self interest the world has yet seen. It was commended to his people in words that are as remarkable as its purpose. 'I recommend', he said, 'that we make it possible for those nations to continue to obtain war material in the United States, fitting their orders into our own programme. Nearly all their material would, if the time ever came, be useful for our own defence. For what we send abroad, we shall be repaid within a reasonable time after the close of hostilities in similar materials, or, at our own option, in other goods which they can produce and which we need. Let us say to the democracies, "We are putting forth our energies, resources and organizing powers to give you strength to regain and maintain a free world. We shall send you in ever-increasing numbers, ships, aeroplanes, tanks and guns. This is our purpose and our pledge."'

The Bill was introduced into both Houses of Congress on January the 10th. Two days later Mr. Willkie announced his approval of the Bill 'with modifications'; and on the 15th Mr. Cordell Hull informed the Foreign Affairs Committee that the Bill was necessary 'for the defence of the United States'. Mr. Stimson regarded the Bill as urgently necessary and the Secretary of the Navy, in supporting it, attributed the success of the United States in maintianing the Monroe Doctrine to the support of the British Fleet. These statements which are regarded in Britain as truths,

if not truisms, were novel doctrine for the United States; but the Bill jogged on its leisured way until February the 8th when it was passed by 260 votes against 165. Another month passed before the Senate had finished with it and, as amended, it was approved by the House of Representatives on March the 11th and signed by Mr. Roosevelt. The following day the President sent to Congress a request for an immediate appropriation of 7,000 million dollars to cover the purposes of the Act and, two days later, Mr. Stimson stated that war material under the Act was already being sent to Britain.

The extraordinary character of this piece of legislation is not yet fully appreciated; and it had been chaperoned by so many moving speeches that most people in Britain thought the battle was now over. They knew through constant telling that they could not in a moment overtake the immense resources which Hitler had been amassing for so long; but at present Britain was undergoing a nightly bombardment from the air. There was no cessation in this indiscriminate attack and, though the Germans preferred to strike at houses, hospitals and churches, it was pretty certain that they were doing some damage to Britain's war potential. The 'Lease and Lend' Bill, in such circumstances, tended to be translated as meaning that the United States would now do all that was necessary to provide 'the tools'. Such a standpoint totally misconceived the magnitude of the task and the present scope of the American help. At this time the British output of aeroplanes, for instance, was perhaps a little ahead of the German; but, taking this as optimistically as possible, it could mean no more than a beginning of things. Britain and her Allies had to make up for all the accumulation of years and if they were to achieve real supremacy this would involve perhaps doubling the output.

It is of interest in this connection that, even in January 1917 a programme for an output of 2,000 engines per month was sanctioned; but a few months later the Government replaced this by an extended output which would ultimately reach 4,500 per month. This number was to be made up of 3,500 from British sources, 500 from France and 500 from America. On June the 5th of the present year the War Department informed the House Appropriations Committee that German aircraft production was conservatively estimated at 3,000 per month, and might reach 4,000 to 6,000 a month with the assistance of factories in occupied countries.

These figures suggest the background against which the needs of the hour can be measured. As far as one can see, only 743 aeroplanes were sent to Britain from America during the first year of the war; and during the year 1940 only about 1,800. Clearly, in the light of such figures, Britain's chance of securing air supremacy in any reasonable time could not be based upon American output; and it is wiser to rest one's expectations upon the actual deliveries than upon the estimated output. That the deliveries were growing there can be no doubt; and the total of 1940 reached its respectable size through the last few months averaging about 800. But in December Mr. Knudsen stated that the actual output of military aircraft was only 700 per month, though Mr. Patterson, the Under-Secretary for War, estimated that during 1941 Britain would receive a total of about 12,000 machines from a steadily developing production. After 1941 the rate of output would soar ahead.

But it was not only aeroplanes that were required. Britain also required ships and tanks as well as guns of all sorts; and in June the attack upon Russia came to impose another

check upon the supply to Britain, though it was in pursuance of the purposes of the war. Russia was engaging the main strength of the German Army; and, though she was inflicting vast losses upon it, she was also suffering heavily and required tanks, guns, aeroplanes and ammunition as well as aeroplane spirit. It was because the war was one of machines and oil that the problem of supply overshadowed everything. But it could not be ignored that during the spring the American output was only getting under way and the plans for supremacy mainly dealt with the years 1942 and 1943, whereas Hitler was exerting his full strength at the moment. The problem of overtaking the German production is merely a matter of time. The foundations have been laid for a vast development; but the fruits of this great change in American economy will not be seen for many months. If few people in England appear to recognize the probability that the war will be a long one and will call for increasing efforts on all sides before victory looms in sight this is unfortunately not a little due to the misinterpretation of America's effort.

The United States was mobilizing in other ways that touched the war more directly. An amicable arrangement had been come to between America and Britain about the leasing of certain Atlantic bases to the United States. These concerned her distant defence, upon the lines urged in the essays of Mahan. On March the 27th the agreement for the lease of these bases was signed in London by Mr. Churchill, Mr. Winant, the new Ambassador of the United States, and the High Commissioner for Canada. This was a purely defensive action; and not even Hitler could legitimately object to it. But a few days later the Secretary of the Treasury took action that caused a great outcry among the enemy. It had been discovered that the crews of a number

of Italian cargo ships had damaged about twenty of them, and the Secretary of the Treasury at once ordered Coast-guards to enter and take possession of all Italian vessels in the United States. This was carried out; and the crews were taken into custody. Action was taken under an Act which empowered the administration to take measures designed to prevent damage to the ports through fires, explosions or scuttling. Later in the year the Government were authorized to requisition any of the foreign ships in United States harbours. The French ships were taken into 'protective custody' on the same day; and, on June the 5th, the Maritime Commission claimed the right to transfer to foreign registry any ship owned wholly or partly by a United States citizen. Another means of reinforcing the British shipping fleets, besides building, had been discovered.

Another direction in which the United States took action in her own defence was the agreement with the Danish Minister to take Greenland under her protection; and, later in the year, United States troops were sent to Iceland to share temporarily with the British forces and ultimately to replace them in the defence of the island against aggression. The defence of the western hemisphere which was invoked to cover these novel proceedings had led to other more challenging developments. The Atlantic patrols, carefully distinguished from 'convoy', extended far out into the Atlantic. An American admiral suggested that they reached half-way across the ocean and covered a stretch of 2,000 miles. They certainly made a significant difference to the situation, though they had not so far clashed with Germany. For the moment she was too fully engaged in her attack upon Russia to find time for challenging America. The further question of 'convoy' seemed fated to make little progress. On June the 6th, Mr. Willkie stated in Chicago that

over 10 per cent of materials sent from America to Britain were lost. Serious as this was, he said, it was not so grave as the loss of the ships conveying the materials. The naval patrol helped but did not stop the sinkings. '*I say deliberately that unless those losses are stopped or greatly reduced, and at once, England cannot survive.*' That statement was sufficiently pointed; and the development suggested was obvious. Numerous speakers went as far; but stopped there. The offensive word 'convoy' dare not be mentioned. It was considered as suggesting entry into the war; and there were very many Americans indeed who, wholeheartedly in favour of helping England, regarded the policy much as those who supported Mr. Hoover thought of feeding the children in occupied Europe: they thought of it as an act of philanthropy and not of self-interest. If they had accepted the administration policy fully they could hardly have hesitated to take the chance of acting against Hitler while Britain was strong in preference to the risk, if they did not, of having to fight for their independence later on, alone. They were willing to accept Mr. Roosevelt's lead but refused to face the logic of it. How like ourselves, after all, are these strange Americans! So Mr. Hull, the Secretary of State, was found stating, 'We will find a way to ensure that the weapons . . . reach the hands that so eagerly await them. . . . When we set ourselves a task we finish it.' The way was clear and simple; but it was a way the people had no desire to go. Mr. Stimson spoke in the same strain; but the matter remained there.

There was a significant development in this direction in April when General Wavell's success in Italian East Africa enabled Mr. Roosevelt to declare the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden open to United States shipping. This was a great step in advance; and its effect was to open a new avenue of

supply to the Near East when supply dominated that theatre. But the action appeared to be accepted by the people of the United States on the assurance that it did not precipitate them into war. Indeed, many of the acts of the administration could have been taken as sufficient justification for a German declaration of war against the United States. As Mr. Churchill stated, later on, the one person upon whom rested the decision as to whether the United States was to be at war or not was Hitler. But the seizure of German and Italian shipping and the right, afterwards taken, to requisition were accepted after a strong protest. In June the President went further and froze all German and Italian assets in the country and those of all occupied countries. He also ordered an inventory of all foreign owned property. These drastic blows were also suffered with only an attempt at retaliation. Two days later the President ordered the closing of all German Consulates with the removal of their personnel from American territory, the closing of the German New York Information Library and various German agencies and the removal of all Germans connected with them, on the ground that they had been occupied with activities inimical to the welfare of the country. The closing was to take place before July the 10th. On this occasion Germany *and Italy* retaliated. Each of these countries parodied the President's Note and asked that officials be removed by July the 15th; and the President, on June the 21st, extended the measure to Italy, and ordered the closing of Italian Consulates and Fascist organizations by July the 15th. The President's action was, of course, thoroughly justified. The one thing which seemed remarkable was that it had been delayed so long. But it was a pointed rebuff to the Axis Powers. They were not, however, yet ready to break with the United States and even

this rebuff was taken as part of the ordinary commerce of friendly nations.

It is not easy to sum up the position of the United States with regard to the war. The standpoint of the administration was clear. It was based upon the appreciation that the United States' independence was vitally bound up with the fate of Britain and her allies. There seems little room for doubt that they sincerely meant what they so often said in this matter and the grave step of declaring a State of Emergency could not otherwise have been taken. The very choice of the bases which had been occupied by arrangement with the British Government was inspired by the writings of Mahan who saw so clearly the dangers of conceiving defence too narrowly. The immense sums set apart for rearmament, the generous provisions of the 'Lease and Lend' Act, the extension of the naval patrol out into the Atlantic and the application of the meaning of western hemisphere to include Iceland—all showed a real determination to assist the cause for which Britain stands. The repeated warnings to the Vichy Government were motived by the same decision. The turn-over of the industrial organization to war production in which Britain was to have so large a share owed its origin to the same inspiration. These actions speak with one voice. The fact that the reorganization lagged so far behind the clear intention and that words seemed so much stronger than actions may be explained by the President's loyalty to the democratic tradition of his country.

The Allies have very much indeed for which to thank the President and people of the United States, not merely for the help without which they can hardly hope to win the war but also for many generous expressions of opinion about the issue that fires Britain to its task. If they could wish

that the assistance were based on the full acceptance of the logic of the situation, it is because, at long last, such assistance would be the more powerful and immediate if it were recognized as an imperative measure of self-defence. There is an adage about looking a gift horse in the mouth. But the issue of this war is too vital for the future development of civilization throughout the world for reticence to be justified. And there are objections to the muddle-headedness of the 'isolationists' who, with such profound irrevelance, are now being justified as 'sincere', and to those who so readily accept the German claim to denude Europe of every scrap of food and disregard the most fundamental responsibility of a government—to feed the people over whom it exercises control.

CHAPTER 8

The Terror that Flyeth by Night

If the 'Battle of Britain' prevented the defeat of Germany's main enemy by a *coup de main* it was the bearing of the common people that frustrated the more brutal and persistent attack of the night bomber. During the spring, though there were occasional raids by day, the Luftwaffe were never pitted without reservation against the Royal Air Force. Marshal Goering had learned his lesson and, during the long nights, the enemy air attack was directed against the great cities of Britain. The terrible raid upon Coventry had been to some extent forgotten; and the Germans came to the conclusion that large towns can no more be permanently destroyed by a single devastating attack than can aerodromes. During the spring therefore the Luftwaffe worked to a slightly different design. The attempt was now made to wipe out the great cities by a series of consecutive attacks and most of them experienced not one but several of these series. The campaign continued for some months until the bulk of the German air fleets were needed on the Russian front and, starting at a lower level than that of most of the autumn raids, it reached a peak of fury and destruction about the middle of May. This can best be appreciated from the record of the casualties:

	Killed	*Injured*
February	789	1,068
March	4,259	5,557
April	6,065	6,926
May	5,394	5,181
June	399	461
	16,906	19,193

This list of casualties does not exhaust the toll of human damage. The only people listed as injured were those detained in hospital; and, besides these, there were numbers of others who were slightly but definitely injured and hundreds of others who suffered from shock. In some places, like the Merseyside and the Clyde, the number of casualties in a single night was appalling. In one raid there were over 500 killed and the same number gravely injured in Liverpool; and on the Clydeside the number of casualties was even higher. Both of these raids occurred in March, and the casualties in those two places accounted for almost a quarter of the total of the whole month. In working-class districts like these, moreover, thousands of those who escaped injury were rendered homeless and lost almost all they possessed. The plight of these human derelicts would have been intolerable but for the social services which were created to afford first-aid and for the legislation which provided for the restoration of destroyed property. Up to the sum of £200 such restoration was covered by Government indemnity without insurance and for bigger sums a small premium was charged. Facilities were also provided for immediate advances where necessary.

But such services as these, admirable and far-seeing as they were, could not touch the core of the problem. They

could not create, they did little more than reflect a matchless spirit. The binding up of wounds and the restoration of lost property cannot make people suffer attack cheerfully and face the repetition with high courage; and the splendid heart with which people faced the peril and constant strain is known to everyone. It forms, indeed, an imperishable memory. No-one who lived through these nights is likely to forget the strain of them. In spite of the provision of shelter, it was and remains impossible to provide a perfectly safe refuge for more than the smallest percentage of the population. Unless mankind becomes a race of troglodytes, the bombing air-raid is certain to entail casualties. As practised by the Germans, the raids had the infliction of casualties as a direct objective; and it is impossible to survey the numbers of small houses destroyed without coming to the conclusion that some districts were selected with a view to the casualties that could be inflicted upon working-class people. In some of the pre-war analyses of the moral effect of raids it was noted that the reaction would be greater among the least and most flourishing. The very poor, it was thought, would tend to revolt and the rich to flee. In both cases, it was imagined, the ultimate effect would be much the same.

The raids, however, were, whether by accident or design, on the whole indiscriminate, through the concentration upon areas rather than single objectives. Some part of this effect was no doubt due to the developing power of the anti-aircraft guns. They not only broke up the bomber concentrations and compelled them to keep out of range but also destroyed a number of them. In compelling the raiders to fly at a great height the guns served two purposes: they made the planes an easier target for the night fighter and they made accurate aiming more difficult. They achieved

this effect also by preventing the bombers maintaining a straight course. The growing precision of the new scientific methods of locating aeroplanes emphasized all of these effects; and the destruction of bombers cannot have improved the *morale* of the raiders. In six nights of the second week of March no fewer than thirty-seven German raiders were destroyed. The proportion can hardly have been great enough to have acted as a deterrent, though, to the number of aeroplanes brought down, an equal or greater number should be added for machines injured and incapable of further flight without repair.

Such results no doubt had some slight influence upon the resolute bearing of those who suffered in the raids; but vindictiveness did not apparently play any significant part in the determination to see the war through at whatever cost. This impulse made its appearance after such raids as that on Coventry in the preceding autumn; but it was not very widespread, in spite of the discomfort and strain which all had to suffer. Those who went to public shelters had discomforts of their own to bear; and yet, to see them returning in the early morning, they might have been returning from a picnic. Life is a resilient thing; and, among British people, it is not customary to exaggerate one's hurt or to take suffering too tragically. The characteristic seems to be shared by all the nations who live under the British flag. Sometime after the war is over the epic resistance of Malta will find a pen that is worthy of it. This small island lies less than sixty miles from Sicily and for months it seemed as if the German dive-bombers there, as well as the Italians who had claimed the island, made it their plaything. Day by day, hour by hour, the enemy raiders came over the island and wrought as much damage and destruction as they could. Had it not been for the natural caves, it is difficult to

imagine how the inhabitants could have borne the ordeal which the enemy inflicted upon them. But they were not content merely to suffer; they fought back. The gunners, native as well as British, inflicted heavy loss on the raiders; and the fighter squadrons exacted full payment for all the damage. But for some time so frequent and heavy were the raids that it seemed probable the enemy were preparing to invade the island. That was not attempted in the period covered by this volume; but it could hardly have inflicted upon the inhabitants any greater strain than that of providing the objective for bombing exercise for the enemy planes in Sicily and maintaining a firm and cheerful front under such conditions.

In Britain if the raids were not so persistent they were as continuous and more widespread. The raids took for one of their series of objectives the chief ports in use by shipping; and, by repeated and very destructive raids, attempted to reinforce their attack upon the sea transport. A stream of bombers attacked Swansea on three consecutive nights beginning on February the 19th. They followed a familiar procedure by dropping numbers of incendiary bombs and then high explosives. Kept at a great height, the raiders appear to have dropped their bombs at random; and, on one of the nights, numbers of trees were set on fire and a football ground was heavily bombed. But there was considerable damage to churches and public buildings, though the fire-fighting services were very quick and effective in dealing with the incendiary bombs; and, not only was the anti-aircraft fire heavy and accurate, but the night fighters were also active. In spite of all efforts many people were killed and injured and many made homeless. Portsmouth suffered a series of raids which began with the March full moon. This was the heaviest yet made upon the district

and, with it, began a destructive period for the town. On the night of the 10th four of the raiders were shot down over Portsmouth and, in all, eight were destroyed that night. One street is said to have been almost completely wiped out on this occasion, and there was much damage to business premises and private houses. This was not the last time the port was raided. There were fresh visits on the nights of April the 17th and 27th. Plymouth was also very heavily attacked on several occasions and serious damage was caused to civilian dwellings. The first of the heavy raids occurred on the night of March the 20th; and, so severe was the damage that people were being taken from the ruins of buildings throughout most of the next day. Such was the condition of the port when the next night the raid was repeated, and the social services of the town were strained to deal with the injured and the homeless. As in the case of Coventry the smaller cities can be proportionately more heavily damaged without the advantage that comes from the possession of a numerous band of workers. Plymouth is a possible instance of publicity being a positive danger in war time. It can hardly be doubted that one of the reasons for the further visits to the port was the reports that appeared in the press. In April it was raided again three nights in succession beginning with the 21st; and it was visited once more on the night of the 28th.

There were also heavy raids on Bristol which caused much damage to many of its fine buildings and numbers of dwelling houses. Heavily bombed on the night of March the 16th when there were a considerable number of casualties, the city was raided again on April the 3rd, for four hours, on the following night and also on the 11th. Apart from Plymouth, Bristol was perhaps the city to suffer worst in the west country. Bristol, Swansea, Cardiff all suffered

heavily. In the Midlands Coventry also came in for the attention of the raiders once more and on the nights of April the 8th and 10th was again heavily raided. Birmingham was frequently the objective when 'a town in the Midlands' was described in the reports as having been the main target for the Germans. Hull, the Humber area, and Manchester among others suffered in the spring offensives. It even ranged as far as Belfast where it caused a considerable amount of damage; but the heaviest attacks, apart from those on London, were reserved for the Clydeside and the Merseyside.

The first intensive raid on the Clydeside occurred on the night of March the 13th when hundreds of bombers appeared over Glasgow and wrecked numbers of humble dwellings. Glasgow has a considerable amount of tenement property and within a small area a vast number of people may live. The high explosives following incendiaries upon such a concentration caused a great number of casualties. But, in pursuance of their usual custom, the Germans repeated the visit on the following night before the city services had had time to clear up the destruction of the earlier raid; and there was another raid on the night of the 18th. Another series of visits took place in May; and a remarkable amount of destruction was caused in these attacks. But it seemed that the worst fury, apart from that reserved for the capital, was shown against Liverpool and the Merseyside. Liverpool, whose seven miles of splendid docks were at one time the pride of the North and the glory even of the country, had fallen on evil days before the outbreak of the war. The vast trade which had formerly made it a flourishing city had suffered a diversion to the southern ports and in some of the fine docks, now empty of shipping, the approaches had become silted up. Where a constant stream of traffic used to

ply between the docks and stations and warehouses, the dock roads seemed like streets of the dead. It is one of the ironies of the war that it should have brought new life to these docks; but with it were sown the seeds of death. The great ports of Britain were an extension of the area of the Battle of the Atlantic. In them, frequently for a much longer period than was necessary or desirable, numbers of ships great and small rested against the quay-sides and formed an important target for the German bombers. Moreover, there were a number of aerodromes in the neighbourhood of the Mersey; and the impressionistic raiding of the Luftwaffe favours such areas where if it does not hit one objective it might hit something that would damage the enemy.

The March full moon fell upon the 12th and was seized upon by the Luftwaffe for a series of heavy raids. Liverpool was one of the places which suffered on this occasion. On the nights of the 12th and 13th the city and port were heavily raided; and there was another raid on the 18th. It has already been pointed out that on one of these nights there were no fewer than a thousand casualties, of whom half represented the dead. The military damage was slight as compared with this toll of the city's people; and once more the poor seemed to suffer worst. But this was not to be the last of the German attempts to wreck the port and the shipping upon which Britain depends for her life and continued war effort. At the beginning of May Liverpool was raided for seven consecutive nights. This was for a provincial city an experience that appears to have been unique; and inevitably the toll of people killed and injured in the raids grew with the damage to valuable shipping.

But, during this long programme of raids upon the cities and ports of the United Kingdom, London continued to suffer. Very few weeks in the spring failed to witness

attacks upon the capital. During February the raids were frequent, and heavy casualties were caused. Several street shelters were struck with fatal results. The hospitals from the first suffered badly. On one occasion the nurses were having a staff dance when the raiders dropped their bomb and by torchlight the nurses in their dancing frocks assisted the doctors. It is impossible to recount the deeds of superb coolness and heroism which marked many of these hospital raids when injured nurses insisted on struggling to protect and help their patients. Many of them were killed; but, while they were able to move, they continued with their work as though the emergency were part of the routine. It became monotonous in these days to read of 'one of the heaviest attacks', of 'the heaviest attack for some time', or 'one of the major attacks'. Each had its incomparable aura of shock and strain; and the impression depends upon the accident of experience. There were heavy attacks on several days in March; hospitals, churches, public buildings and a host of undistinguished dwelling houses were damaged or destroyed. In some places whole streets were reduced to a mass of rubble. In one neighbourhood for several miles the houses on either side of an omnibus route were almost all ruined. In certain of the poorer neighbourhoods big blocks of municipal flats were destroyed.

One particularly vicious attack was delivered on the night of April the 16th when eight hospitals suffered and many churches were hit, including Saint Paul's Cathedral. On this occasion six of the bombers were brought down, and throughout the day the ruins of one of them in a Kensington street were visited by curious crowds. This raid was the heaviest suffered up to that time, and the damage was widespread. The Germans evidently had deliberately set themselves to sow as much destruction as possible, for

they announced it as 'a reprisal' for the raid on 'residential and cultural Berlin' on the night of April the 10th. This was not the first occasion on which Saint Paul's had suffered; but the damage was now so serious that the cathedral was closed for the time. A further raid on the following Saturday night caused much damage in the city area and, at noon next day, there were still fires to be seen and streets were festooned with hose pipes. There was a very heavy raid on the night of the May full moon, the 10th, when Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament and the British Museum were damaged. Even the face of Big Ben was darkened, and the broadcasting of his voice was interrupted for a brief time. But these, perhaps, were not the most notable features of the raid. This was the shooting down of thirty-three of the raiders; and the effect upon the Germans was apparently salutary, for the great raids seemed to fall off afterwards. This big toll of the raiders appears to have coincided with a heavy raid, though German airmen were reported as suggesting that on some occasions the mass of the raiders swamped the defence. This would appear to be a natural development; but, as a fact, it has been found that the anti-aircraft guns secure a higher percentage in proportion as the number of raiders is higher.

There were a few raids in June and some in July; but the tide had ebbed away to the East for the time being and it carried on its crests not only the Luftwaffe squadrons which might have been continuing the task of destroying Britain but also growing numbers of the Royal Air Force to the shores of occupied Europe. There had been some daylight raids at the beginning of the year and some inconvenience and damage were caused by them. But they were mainly of the 'tip-and-go' variety and made little impression. To a growing extent they were disregarded. In the large cities

the rhythm of life went on, a little thinner it may be though steady and continuous, even after the air-raid warnings. Even when the guns were firing near by it was a very rare event to see the streets deserted. The daylight raids never had the same effect on the mind as those which occurred at night and of these it was no single visitation but the continuance that formed the real test of fibre.

The cumulative material effect of the raids can hardly be exaggerated. It became difficult to find a space in the capital where the damage had not left unsightly scars. A very high proportion of the historic churches had been damaged if not destroyed. It seemed, as a foreign visitor said, as if the Nazis were destroying history. That, of course, was true; but they were destroying something in which history survived, something which is more immediately needed, though without conscious realization, by ordinary men and women: they were and are destroying beauty. The ugliness which they were sowing over the country could not fail to have its effect upon the outlook of the people; and yet, not content with witnessing it under compulsion in moving through the towns and cities, they seemed to regard the ruins as a fit subject for illustrations in the newspapers and on the films. Somehow British people are, as Mr. Hopkins said, 'a tough crowd', in spite of their kindliness and sentimentality. It had been found in the raids upon Barcelona, so insignificant in reality in spite of the stories of propagandists, that it was impossible to discover any increase in mental disturbance; and there is no record of any such phenomenon in Britain. Indeed there was no sign of the ordeal; and this is a very remarkable thing. For when the raiders visited this place or that, they frequently dropped bombs over a great number of towns and villages. One effect of the growing power of the anti-aircraft defence of

London was the impulse to drop bombs indiscriminately on the countryside. Even where bombs were not dropped, the drone of the bombers was heard, generally after, though sometimes before, the wail of the sirens; and then followed the various noises of the guns. The bombs could be heard over considerable areas—the long sinister whistle and then the explosion.

For long periods at a stretch, the nights were made hideous by this complex of horrors. When the sirens were not heard they were expected; and familiarity bred no content. They were hideous in themselves; and association made them worse. The noises of the bombs became so much a feature of the strain that there were solemn assurances that they did not really mean as much as they said: their bite was much worse than their bark! If you heard a bomb, it was unlikely to do you any harm. The bomb to be feared was the bomb which was not heard! It is difficult to discover how this assurance was expected to increase the *morale* of the people. But the grim sense of humour that is no infrequent part of their make-up extracted some fun out of it. The plain fact appears to be that for by far the greater majority of them there was no need of artificial stimulants. They were superb, kindly in their readiness to assist those who had suffered in the raids, brave and apologetic when injured either in body or estate. Rupert Brooke has written, among many incomparable lines, the following which I imagine he would have felt deserved by the fine bearing of his countrymen under an ordeal unparallelled in its horror and persistence:

> *'England's the one land I know*
> *Where men with splendid hearts may go.'*

CHAPTER 9

Germany Loses Bismarck

It was in the heart of this period of strain from constant air-raids and from the adverse turns of the war that an incident occurred which provided a relief out of all proportion to its real importance. The Balkan campaign was over, the attack upon Crete was under way and the recovery in Iraq appeared to be moving at a slower pace than seemed in any degree necessary or desirable, when the news came that a German battleship and cruiser had been sighted in the Denmark Strait, between Iceland and Greenland. This was not the first that had been seen of these vessels. They were first spotted by an aerial reconnaissance machine in the harbour of Bergen on May the 21st and the following day it was discovered that they had left. Arrangements were promptly made to contact them.

On the evening of Friday, May the 23rd, they were identified in Denmark Strait, where H.M.S. *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* had been dispatched to find and shadow them, as the battleship *Bismarck* and the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. *Bismarck* was one of Germany's two newest battleships and the most powerful in commission. Her recorded tonnage was 35,000; but there was later some doubt as to whether the specifications had not been exceeded. She carried eight 15-inch guns and had a secondary armament of twelve 5·9-inch guns, was

more heavily armoured than *Hood* though capable of about equal speed. She had some novel features in her design; and, through the multiplicity of her watertight compartments, was thought to be unsinkable. *Prinz Eugen* was a 10,000-ton cruiser of a comparable armament to *Exeter*. When the British cruisers discovered them the two enemy ships were steering south-west at high speed. They were shadowed throughout the night by *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* while other units took up stations to intercept and bring them to battle. So skilfully were the dispositions made that, early on the morning of the 24th, contact was made by the battle-cruiser *Hood* and the new British battleship *Prince of Wales*. Though the visibility was bad, the conditions seemed to favour the British squadron. *Hood* was a ship of 42,000 tons. For some time she was the largest warship in the world. With an armour of battleship standard, she had a speed of 31 knots and practically the same armament as *Bismarck*. She was only completed after the last war; and it was believed that the weakness which the early part of the Jutland battle had made evident in three battle cruisers had been remedied in *Hood*. This complacency was, however, disturbed by the fate of the great battle-cruiser on this occasion. *Bismarck* was about 24,000 yards distant, little more than a black speck on the horizon, when fire was opened by *Hood* and *Prince of Wales*. *Bismarck* was damaged and, at one time, on fire; but *Hood* was hit near one of her great gun turrets. Volumes of black smoke were seen and suddenly, while the battle-cruiser steamed forward firing steadily, there was a loud explosion and she began to split into pieces. The bow rose and she disappeared. The German ships are known for their gunnery but to find the weak spot of the battle-cruiser at such a range required a considerable infusion of luck.

The sinking of *Hood* was a great loss and a considerable shock to naval opinion everywhere. The Germans made capital out of the success, as they were entitled to; but to conclude the communiqué with the words 'the German forces are continuing their operations' was a characteristic touch of bombast that merited the retribution it at length met. The two German ships were, in fact, running away with all their might. They can hardly have expected to escape further challenge after having been in action; and any strategic role they had was in abeyance until their escape was made good. *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* lay immobilized in harbour at Brest. This was known pretty generally though hidden from the German public. *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* were to shoulder their task. The Germans had won the first round in the battle, and the loss of almost the whole of *Hood's* crew was a greater blow than that of the battle-cruiser.

The chase continued throughout the day, *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* shadowing, despite every attempt to shake them off. It was noticed that *Bismarck* was leaving a wake of oil. The damage 'not worth mentioning' which the German communiqué reported was apparently far from negligible. The battleship's speed seemed to be reduced. But apparently the damage was sufficiently repaired as the falling-off in speed was not again mentioned until it was caused by attack. During the evening *Prince of Wales*, which had also suffered slight damage, again made contact and opened fire. The Germans at once turned away to the west and then towards the south. By this time the Commander-in-Chief and Admiralty had made arrangements to prevent the escape of the battleship and exact retribution. The Commander-in-Chief and the Home Fleet were approaching from the north. From the south-east Admiral Somerville, in *Renown*,

was hastening forward with the squadron based on Gibraltar. *Rodney* and *Ramillies*, engaged at the time on convoy duty in the north Atlantic, were also making their best speed to assist in the round-up. There was a concentration from all points of the compass, and it seemed that the hours of the enemy ships were numbered. During the night, in an attempt to make sure they should not escape, torpedo-carrying aircraft of *Victorious* attacked and secured a hit. *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* were still shadowing.

Yet, in spite of every precaution, about 8 o'clock in the morning of Sunday the enemy had disappeared. The visibility was poor, as, indeed, it had been throughout the chase; and by this time the mist had thickened. The position was about 350 miles S.S.E. of the most southerly point of Greenland; and there were several possible courses the ships might have taken. The naval units now set about a search for the ships and aircraft of the Coastal Command and of the Royal Canadian Air Force began to cast about over the Atlantic. This is, perhaps, the strangest part of the whole episode. It must have seemed impossible to the British naval units that ships so recently hit by a torpedo from one of the aircraft of *Victorious* and so closely shadowed could disappear into the unknown. At worst, it would have appeared possible for a few hours. Actually it was some thirty-one hours before *Bismarck* was again picked up; and *Prinz Eugen* was not seen again until she was discovered safely in harbour at Brest, fourteen days later.

It was a Catalina flying-boat that sighted *Bismarck* about 10.30 in the morning of Monday, May the 26th. It had been lost for a day and a half with more ships and aeroplanes searching for it than ever before sought any ship; and it must have seemed to Admiral Lutjens that he had shaken off the pursuit and was at length safe. When the

battleship was discovered it was steaming about 550 miles west of Land's End, making for harbour at Brest or Saint Nazaire. The flying-boat barely escaped to announce its important news. As soon as it discovered *Bismarck* it was subjected to a tornado of shell and at once damaged. The boat was badly shaken and seemed for a moment to have passed out of control. It was holed in half a dozen places. It was short of petrol and its tanks were punctured. It was badly holed in the hull; and, if it were to land safely, it must reach port in daylight. It contrived to reach its base that evening after eighteen hours' flying. It had done its duty although it lost touch about half an hour after its momentous discovery. Three-quarters of an hour later naval aircraft of *Ark Royal*, surely the most notorious unit in the Navy, sighted the battleship; and she was never lost again. She was then steaming east towards harbour and safety. *King George V* with Admiral J. C. Tovey, Commanding the Home Fleet, and the battleship *Rodney* were approaching, but were not close enough for action. Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville in *Renown* was hastening north-west and sent the cruiser *Sheffield* to make contact and take up the shadowing. In the afternoon it seemed desirable to attempt to reduce the speed of the battleship so that she should have no chance of further eluding the fate which the Navy had decided was due to her; and aircraft of *Ark Royal* attacked with torpedoes but achieved no success. It was no small feat to deliver the attack. There was a heavy gale and the ship was plunging in terrific seas; but the aircraft took off, delivered their attack, took off again and attacked once more, returning in safety to their parent ship.

This attack was decisive. The Navy had not forgotten how the Italian fleet, in spite of its reluctance, had been brought to action at Cape Matapan by means of damage

inflicted by a torpedo-carrying aircraft; and it was merely poetic justice that *Ark Royal*, so often sunk by enemy communiqués, should have the honour of compelling *Bismarck* to wait for her pursuers. *Sheffield* had come up about 5.30 and was shadowing when the naval aircraft attacked for the second time; and it was seen that one torpedo struck the battleship amidships and another the starboard quarter. *Bismarck* was for a few moments in serious straits. She made two complete circles, and when she resumed her course it was at a much reduced speed. *Cossack* and other destroyers made contact about 11 o'clock; and, between 1.20 and 1.30, *Zulu*, *Cossack* and *Maori* attacked with torpedoes. The two last each secured one hit; and after *Maori's* attack fire was seen to break out on *Bismarck's* forecastle. An hour later the battleship stopped; her steering-gear was out of action and her speed was reduced still more. She was then no more than 400 miles west of Brest and had been pursued by the British forces for over 1,750 miles.

It must have seemed to the anxious Admiral Lutjens that by this time he was near safety. He was the more assured for a reason that only appeared later on. German aircraft were detailed to help him in his plight; but they had not arrived in this hour of crisis. Hasty repairs were effected; and, shortly, the battleship got under way again. Now, however, she was steaming at a rate of under seven knots. But she could still steam; and her armament was in perfect order. It was now the morning of Tuesday, May the 27th; and, shortly after daylight, *Bismarck* engaged the British destroyers with her guns, one shell of which would have shot them to pieces. *Norfolk*, also, was in action almost immediately afterwards; and very soon the heavy ships. The Commander-in-Chief had intended to close *Bismarck* at

dawn; but the visibility was so bad and so variable that it was decided to wait for full daylight. Shortly before 9 o'clock the last act began. *King George V* and *Rodney* engaged with their main armament. It was all over in about a quarter of an hour. These big ships are designed to inflict, as to bear, terrific damage; and *Bismarck* seemed scarcely in full control as she responded. Yet it was noted that one of her salvos fell near the *Rodney*. *Bismarck's* smoke was interfering with the British fire; but, after changing course, *Rodney* was able to get her shells home and soon the German battleship was useless as a fighting unit. She was battered into helplessness. She could not return the British fire; yet she still remained afloat, her flag flying defiantly from the masthead. *Dorsetshire* was ordered to sink her and, finally, after being hit by several torpedoes the great battleship heeled to port and went down.

Ships were detailed for the pursuit of *Prinz Eugen* and this was not abandoned for some days. Meanwhile the aircraft which were expected to save *Bismarck* duly appeared, when all was over, and attempted to take vengeance upon the British naval vessels. The destroyer *Mashona* was hit and later sank. This loss must be added to the account of the battle. Apart from the loss of almost all *Hood's* company, the Admiralty announced the casualties of the action as 25 killed and 13 wounded. Numbers of *Bismarck's* survivors were taken from the sea and brought into a British port. But no-one would feel disposed to balance the deaths of numbers of German seamen against the loss of *Hood's* company. These were a grave loss to the British Navy and all the more to be regretted that they perished by a hit which had in it more luck than skill and found its mark through what will be regarded as a technical weakness in construction. The loss of *Hood* itself, great as it was, was

more than offset by that of *Bismarck*. Germany having the numerically inferior Navy lost more heavily by the destruction of a capital ship than Britain with so many more. This is a purely realist argument; and a few more exchanges of the sort, while it would still leave Britain with a formidable number of capital ships, would deprive Germany of all. On this matter there could be no dispute; and there could be none on the blow to the prestige of the German Navy. *Bismarck* had only been in commission six months and had not before been out of home waters. Moreover, Admiral Lutjens was the first German officer to sustain the honourable name of the German Navy by fighting a battle out. He fought to the end and perished under an attack by overwhelming odds. But, unlike the *Graf Spee*, he made no attempt to escape battle except by means that are recognized and which he would have been foolish not to adopt. It seems to be established that he really thought little of his plight until the torpedoes of *Ark Royal's* aircraft struck his ship; and even then he hoped to escape under cover of a strong air attack by German aeroplanes. He fought, however, skilfully and gallantly; and, when the risks of continuing the battle seemed serious, he sent off *Prinz Eugen* to save herself.

The episode has a number of important lessons which will not be lost upon the Navy and the public. The loss of *Hood* was avenged in a way that clearly established the supremacy of the battleship. In spite of much that has been written in depreciation of this type, it remains the fighting ship of the Navy *par excellence*. Strong arguments can be adduced in proof of the use and excellence of other types; and, no doubt, if other nations would content themselves by building smaller ships the British Navy could afford to do the same. But there would still be a ship that could inflict

and suffer heavier blows than any other; and this would be the battleship. It is and must remain the power behind the throne, the force that covers the exercise of sea power by the smaller units, the cruisers and destroyers. It was not entirely unprofitable that this lesson should be driven home.

These clashes at sea are only the high-lights that illuminate the action of the Navy which never ceases to exercise control over the sea-lanes of the world. The clashes with British battleships had always occurred during the present, and even in the last war, by accident. In neither war had the enemy shown any desire to encounter the might of the British Navy; and there is, of course, no reason why he should. The British Navy, like the German Army, being supreme in its own sphere, attempted to bring the enemy to battle. This is not surprising. But it is at least worthy of remark that the Germans claimed it to be no dishonour for their naval ships to succumb to a superior force and rightly praised the gallantry of *Bismarck* and its commander, while jeering at the British Army in withdrawing from France, Greece and Crete when faced by a superior land and air force.

Another lesson has now presumably passed into established naval tactics. The attack by naval torpedoes, used first decisively at Cape Matapan, had once again justified itself. It is not at all certain that *Bismarck*, like its early companion, would not have escaped to safe harbour if the torpedoes of the naval aircraft had not seriously lowered its speed. When the British destroyers attacked, in the early hours of May the 27th, it was only some thirteen hours' steaming full speed from Brest. It would have been very much nearer if it had not been for the attentions of *Ark Royal's* aircraft; and, if *Victorious* had not launched its aircraft even earlier in the battle, it is doubtful if the thirty-one

hours during which it was lost would not have seen it safely into harbour. The naval aircraft played a decisive part in the battle; and it was torpedoes at the end which destroyed the German illusion about the battleship's being unsinkable. There can be little doubt that its construction was ingenious and would have proved of the greatest service in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred.

When *King George V* and *Rodney* opened fire, on the morning of May the 27th, it was the hundredth case. The organization of the chase had proved the Navy's ability to meet a sudden emergency; and the concentration which was arranged at such short notice, in waters distant many miles from the home bases, cannot have been over-encouraging to the enemy. The aircraft which swept the seas from both sides of the Atlantic were a suggestive reminder of the scope of British power. Indeed, from some points of view, this seems to have been the aeroplane's victory. It was an aeroplane which found the ships in Bergen harbour, discovered that they had left, checked the battleship's speed and made naval action possible, and located it again when lost. But this means no more, in the final analysis, than that it is impossible to conceive successful naval or military action that does not to a considerable extent depend upon the co-operation of the aeroplane. It was, however, something greater than the action of the aeroplane and the battleship: it was the superb staff work, the perfection of the organization that distinguished the episode. The sinking of six supply ships provided the natural epilogue.

CHAPTER 10

The Explosion in Iraq

It was during the Balkan Campaign that the various frictions in Iraq suddenly produced an explosion. A military *coup d'état* had taken place on April the 1st, the constitutional Prime Minister had resigned and Rashid Ali, who in January had been forced to resign, assumed control. The Regent fled; and the King, a child of six, became a prisoner. The British Government had every reason to distrust the change and the men associated with it; and they preserved a watchful attitude. They were entitled under the Treaty of Alliance to various measures of collaboration. The 'permanent maintenance and protection in all circumstances of the essential communications of His Britannic Majesty' were provided for by the grant of air bases at Shaibah, Basra and Habbaniya. The head of the Persian Gulf could not be allowed to pass under alien control without the surrender of vital British interests; and it is from Basra that such control is exercised. It was, therefore, a perfectly natural development when Imperial troops were landed at Basra on April the 17th and 18th. The behaviour of the new Premier seemed perfectly correct. Indeed, so courteous was he that earlier suspicions seemed a gross indelicacy. But when, about eleven days later, several more transports appeared in the Persian Gulf the Iraq Govern-

ment refused permission for the troops to land until those which had already arrived had passed out of the country; and the hostile military clique at once took action. They quickly concentrated about the air base and training ground at Habbaniya, sixty miles west of Bagdad, and curtly informed the Air Officer in Command that they forbade training while the British Government failed to adhere to the Treaty as interpreted by them. Aeroplanes were forbidden to leave the ground and the Iraqi troops in position on the escarpment claimed that they were in possession of the power to enforce their demands. It was this situation that led to the operations in Iraq and exercised a considerable influence upon the development of the Near Eastern situation.

This incident sprang from a long and formidable context. It requires a higher state of civilization than that of the vast majority of freshly emancipated peoples to be content with the mere consolidation of their new-found liberty. Iraq was a state that was founded upon the developments of the last war and when it was admitted fully fledged into the League of Nations the desire to strengthen its position was one of its first preoccupations. Conscription was introduced and the demand came for arms which at the time we were not in a position to supply. We had previously opposed the introduction of conscription for reasons that seemed eminently sound; but, now with the enforced refusal to supply the modern arms required, it seemed that Britain was attempting to fetter the natural development of Iraq. The troubles in Palestine and the ferment of nationalism from which they sprang were a further and more fundamental cause of disaffection and, with the Mufti of Jerusalem and his followers in residence in the country, misunderstanding could only grow. The Axis wireless had an easy and con-

genial task to play upon these motives. It cost them nothing to proclaim their love for Arab aspirations, and they could with perfect sincerity insist that the Jewish claims would never be allowed to interfere with Pan-Arab designs. Neither, of course, would have been permitted to hamper their own.

The soil of discontent was, therefore, provided; and the Axis Powers cultivated it assiduously. When the war broke out Iraq severed relations with Germany and the trouble-makers left the country; but when, at the fall of France, Italy entered the war relations were not broken off. The Italian Legation, therefore, remained in Bagdad as the centre of anti-British intrigue and the Iraq Pan-Arab Press made the most of the German case and the worst of the British. By those who were impressed by the achievements of Germany the Italian Minister was regarded as a sort of insurance; and Rashid Ali, the Prime Minister at the time and an ardent nationalist to boot, began to make less secret of his leanings towards the Axis. So open were his preferences for the Germans that, at the beginning of the year, many of his party whose attachment to the British Alliance was more durable, began to desert him and he came to rely more and more upon a number of ambitious officers in the army. This movement came to a head in January when Rashid Ali was compelled to resign. He was succeeded by General Taha el-Hashimi on February the 1st and it was the attempts of his Cabinet to weaken the grip of the four officers who favoured the Axis that led to its fall. Parliament had no sooner risen on April the 1st than these officers marched upon Bagdad and took possession of the city. The rest followed as has been described already.

The leader of these army officers was Salah ed-Din, the Commander of the 3rd division, who was said to have been

in Axis pay. An ardent pan-Arabist and scientifically trained soldier, he had as his companions the Commanders of the 1st division, the mechanized brigade and the air force; and he appeared to have chosen his moment well. The Balkan campaign was about to begin when the *coup d'état* occurred and when the clash with Britain came to a head the Germans had succeeded in overrunning Yugoslavia and Greece and driving General Wilson's divisions from the mainland of Europe. On May the 1st the Iraq mechanized forces were concentrated about the Habbaniya aerodrome, and on the next day, after ignoring a demand that they should withdraw, they opened fire on the cantonment. Some of the British aircraft were destroyed on the ground and the fighting continued throughout the day. The Iraqi troops moved to the west, overcame an unarmed construction party at Rutba and occupied the place. They seemed now determined to make a fight to maintain their control of affairs. It was an unwise decision, unless they had been assured of immediate German help, since the challenge could have but one end. From this point of view it was well for Britain that the rebel faction took their stand so openly. Iraq is an area where an enemy régime could not be tolerated; and undeclared resistance might have maintained the pro-Axis Government in existence until Germany could take advantage of it.

Retaliation for the unprovoked attack came swiftly. Royal Air Force bombers attacked and destroyed petrol dumps and magazines at Moascar Rashid, the aerodrome outside Bagdad, and shot down a number of Iraqi fighters and severely damaged others. In another heavy raid at least twenty-two aeroplanes were put out of action. An armoured train was bombed and turned back and Iraqi gun positions, mechanized units and troop concentrations out-

side Habbaniya were continuously bombed on Sunday, May the 4th. The aerodrome at Habbaniya had been repeatedly shelled by Iraqi artillery on the Saturday and Sunday from the high ground overlooking the aerodrome; but both landing grounds were in use and the Royal Air Force bombing reduced the volume of fire considerably. At Basra similar action had been forced on the British Commander. The Iraqi had been requested to withdraw from the airport, dock area and power station by a certain hour and the time was even extended. When however, no action was taken the British forces drove them out by bombing and artillery fire and occupied the position.

It was at this point that the Regent issued from Palestine a proclamation denouncing the traitors and stating his determination to return to Iraq. But Rashid Ali and his military supporters insisted on continuing the struggle and they were able to spread the disorder over the country. The strategic importance of Iraq had become plain. Turkey was gravely disturbed at the development; and the Egyptian Government made an appeal to Rashid Ali; but the Prime Minister was more concerned with trying to foment ill-feeling against Britain and, in defiance of the plain facts, informed the Iraqi that it was the British who first opened fire. There were reports that Iran was unsettled and it is certain that already there were considerable numbers of German agents in the country.

The Turkish Government offered to mediate between the British Government and the Iraqi; but this well-meant offer misconceived the situation. As the Regent's proclamation had shown, a wholly unconstitutional Government was in control of Iraq at the moment and the British Government had never acknowledged its authority. They were less able to negotiate with it now that it had begun to attack the

Imperial forces than they had been on the arrival of troops at Basra. As a matter of practical common sense they had informed Rashid Ali of the troops' arrival and were only acting on the letter and spirit of the Treaty in sending them to Basra. The treacherous clique had to be expelled.

Iraqi artillery about Habbaniya was reduced to comparative inactivity by the R.A.F. bombing on Sunday. The shelling was intermittent and of weak volume. The garrison of Habbaniya was intact and suffered few casualties. During the night of Sunday it carried out successful patrols. The greater part of the Iraqi Air Force had been put out of action, partly in attempts to attack British camps but mainly as the result of heavy bombing raids by the Royal Air Force. On Monday, May the 5th, four days after opening their unprovoked attack on Habbaniya, therefore, the Iraqi force was already being hamstrung.

The consequences of this were not slow to appear. With the practical destruction of the Iraqi Air Force and the reduction of the artillery about Habbaniya to irregular, weak, spasmodic shelling the way was clear for the second phase of the British counter-offensive. On Tuesday the Iraqi were ejected from the positions overlooking the cantonment at Habbaniya and bombed continuously as they withdrew towards Falluja. More than 400 prisoners were taken and six 3·7-inch howitzer mountain guns. On this occasion it is stated that howitzers were flown from Basra for the action. After this, Habbaniya was subject only to sniping; and on the 9th, a week after the Iraqi opened fire on the cantonment, the British force occupied the plateau overlooking the settlement. Large quantities of war material were captured and the remnant of the Iraqi troops withdrew westwards to Ramadi and eastward to Falluja. Rutba aerodrome and the surrounding neighbourhood were

occupied the following day, by armoured cars of the Royal Air Force which had crossed the western desert.

Up to this moment Germany, having sown the mischief in Iraq, had left her dupes to cope as best they could with the storm they had raised. But on May the 15th about thirty German aeroplanes landed in the country with technicians and agitators, after using Syrian aerodromes as staging posts. Rashid Ali's appeal had met with this response. Basra and Habbaniya were, at this time, quiet; but the arrival of the Germans showed that the end of the trouble was not yet in sight; and their route raised important and delicate issues. The Vichy Government had, for some time, shown their intention to 'co-operate' with Hitler. Indeed, on this very day, Marshal Pétain stated in a broadcast that 'France' had been compelled to collaborate with Germany in Europe and Africa. The use of the Syrian aerodromes for action against Britain was a form of collaboration which Britain could not tolerate; and the Government authorized action against the German aircraft on the Syrian aerodromes. They were accordingly bombed on the aerodromes at Palmyra, Rayak and Damascus, and at least three of the aircraft were severely damaged and one was burned out. The French High Commissioner protested to the British Consul-General at Beirut; but as, at the same time, he announced that German aircraft had made 'forced landings' on the aerodromes and the French authorities had acted according to the terms of the armistice in speeding their departure, the protest lacked sincerity. It was reported that guns and rifles had been sent from Syria to Iraq; and even if the French acted under duress, they could hardly expect that Britain would tolerate such assistance to the rebel faction.

On Monday, May the 19th, the British resumed their advance and by means of a skilful ground and air attack

occupied Falluja, some twelve miles east of Habbaniya. The intervening country had been flooded by the Iraqi but a wide detour was made and troop-carriers landed men to the east of Falluja. Before the attack military targets in and around the village were bombed and so close was the co-operation of the ground and air troops that there were no British casualties and the bridge over the Euphrates was found to be intact. The next few days were occupied in clearing up the Falluja area and consolidating the position. Air attacks were driven off and German aeroplanes went further east and heavily raided Habbaniya. Some damage was done to buildings but the enemy were intercepted by British fighters and two, at least, were made unserviceable for the future. The capture of Falluja was but a stage on the way to Bagdad but it yielded over 300 prisoners and quantities of stores and ammunition. Moreover, it was evidence of a superiority that could not be explained away and hence, while the German aircraft occupied themselves in daily machine-gunning the cantonment at Habbaniya, the 'technical' advisers were assisting in the preparation of a counter-attack. It was delivered on the night of May the 21st, three weeks after Rashid Ali had challenged Britain, and was not unskilfully made. A force of infantry with light tanks drove in the Imperial outposts and made their way into the town. The Royal Air Force delivered a number of heavy bombing attacks and the Imperial force then counter-attacked, threw the enemy back, captured a number of tanks, reoccupied the position and speedily cleared the town of rebel fugitives.

The position was now sufficiently well in hand to justify the hope that the end was in sight. On May the 23rd the Regent of Iraq, Abdul Shah, returned to the country from Transjordan which was under the rule of the brother of the

King's grandfather. But events hung fire west of the capital where the irrigation tracks had been cut to flood the path of the advance. Meantime the troops were not inactive about Basra. A small expedition, assisted by a naval force and the R.A.F., advanced some six miles up the Tigris from Basra and dispersed a rebel concentration, and another force was preparing to advance up the Euphrates. For a few days the Royal Air Force was left to harry the rebel Iraqi and their friends alone. Concentrations were assiduously bombed. German aeroplanes were machine-gunned and bombed not only in Iraq but also on the Syrian airfields. And then the roads were sufficiently prepared for the main advance to be resumed. On May the 28th the troops with the close co-operation of the Royal Air Force advanced towards the east and captured Khan Nuqta, about half-way between Falluja and Bagdad, and continued a few miles beyond. The floods impeded further advance and the southern force was making good progress up the Euphrates. The ancient city of Ur was captured on May the 29th and Luquait, some fifty miles to the south-east. The last hours of Rashid Ali's *régime* had now been reached. In spite of the obstacle of the floods west of Bagdad and the damage to the Iron Bridge eight miles west of the capital a British mobile force had succeeded in reaching Kadaimai, about five miles to the north. Threatened by a strong force on the west and another moving up the Euphrates, with an armoured detachment only a few miles to the north, the position of Bagdad was seen to be hopeless. Rashid Ali fled to Iran on May the 30th with the Mufti of Jerusalem and the four conspirator generals who had, even more than he, been the origin of the outbreak. His wife had been sent away some time before. The revolt was over. The Mayor of Bagdad took charge of the situation, a Commission of Internal Security was formed,

and the British Commander, on the last day of the month, was asked for an Armistice.

The next day the Regent returned to Bagdad. British troops entered the capital. Two days later air-borne troops occupied Mosul and the British who had been detained as prisoners at Kirkuk were released. The German and Italian 'experts' and airmen fled the country with the German aeroplanes, mainly to Syria; but a number of them went to Iran to resume, with the assistance of the chief plotters, the congenial task of stirring up mischief against Britain. In a few days relations with Italy were broken off and the way was cleared for the resumption of a friendlier atmosphere than had prevailed for many years.

Britain appeared on this and several other occasions to be destined to fight with one hand behind her back. Her reluctance to adopt 'blitzkrieg' methods against a country which had been friendly and was only dragged into military operations by a small, hostile, treacherous clique inevitably gave the rebels an advantage warranted neither by their strength nor by their skill. Operations upon such terms could not fail to give the impression to the watchful eastern nations of a weakness that, in fact, did not exist. It was, however, much to have crushed the movement in Iraq. An area of such importance, containing valuable sources of oil itself, covering the fourth oil-producing country in the world, and abutting on territories of such immense importance to Britain as Transjordania, Syria, Turkey and Iran, could not be allowed to remain under hostile influences. It was, in effect, a Middle Eastern powder magazine and, if no military prestige was to be won by operations against a small country, led astray by a smaller hostile clique, at least success very greatly improved Britain's strategic position in the Middle East.

During the fighting some hundreds of British residents had, for safety's sake, been taken into the British Embassy and United States Legation. The United States Minister had continued his protection in spite of every Iraqi threat. Now these people were able to return to their homes and life welled back into the old familiar channels.

CHAPTER 11

The Syrian Episode

The Iraq incident did not raise the question of Syria, it merely brought matters to a head. It showed beyond any shadow of doubt that the Vichy Government were prepared to lend their territory to Germany for the purposes of attack upon Britain. If, as seems certain, guns and ammunition were sent to the Iraqi clique from Syria, this implied a readiness to go even further. An incident that occurred at the other end of the Mediterranean about this time strengthened this inference. The Royal Air Force announced on May the 29th, that bombers had attacked a motor vessel of between 4,000 and 5,000 tons in Sfax harbour and from the enormous explosion and vast volume of smoke 'it was apparent that the ship was loaded with munitions'. Sfax is a port in the French colony of Tunisia, not many miles from the borders of Tripoli, and it was evident that the ship was destined to that Italian province. The Vichy Government at once protested and, according to the German wireless, the incident caused much indignation in Vichy. The facts, however, established by Vichy itself are (1) that it was a 'belligerent' merchantman, (2) that it was Italian, and (3) 'took refuge' in Sfax. The Vichy protest can have no substance except on the assumption that French ports can be freely used by German or

Italian ships carrying war material to an actual theatre of war. The case was analagous to the use of Syrian aerodromes by German aircraft on their way to Iraq.

Sympathy can be felt for the Vichy Government in their plight. They had surrendered to Hitler in the most abject way any nation could. They had disowned the French signature on an international undertaking and refused to honour the undertaking, given subsequent to the breakdown, to safeguard their Navy. They had abandoned the struggle when a great area with vast resources and considerable bodies of troops still remained beyond Germany's reach. They had surrendered even the good name of France in the hope of purchasing easier conditions for themselves and had found out, too late, that Hitler recognized self-interest as his only enduring motive. It may be asked what they could do when new demands were put forward. But as the months went by they seemed more and more ready to resign the resources which guaranteed them their small amount of freedom. If they had allowed Weygand to declare his independent control of French Africa, there appears to be no reason why they could not have played off the possibility of his revolt against further demands. Instead of this they handed over all they dared of their territory to enemy control for use against Britain.

If we assume the best, that Vichy France could not prevent *any* encroachments of the Axis Powers and could not refuse to protest against Britain's refusal to admit that territories used against her were any longer neutral, at least she could be expected to recognize the British position. So far from doing this, she had replaced Laval by Darlan who used his position to create ill-feeling against Britain on all occasions. *Gringoire*, never exactly obtrusive in its affection for England, quoted him as saying that Britain was the

cause of the war and treated France as her plaything. On another occasion Darlan stated that a British victory would mean no more than that France would become a second-rate Continental Dominion. The attacks upon Sfax and other parts of the French Empire were said to be designed to destroy French sea power.

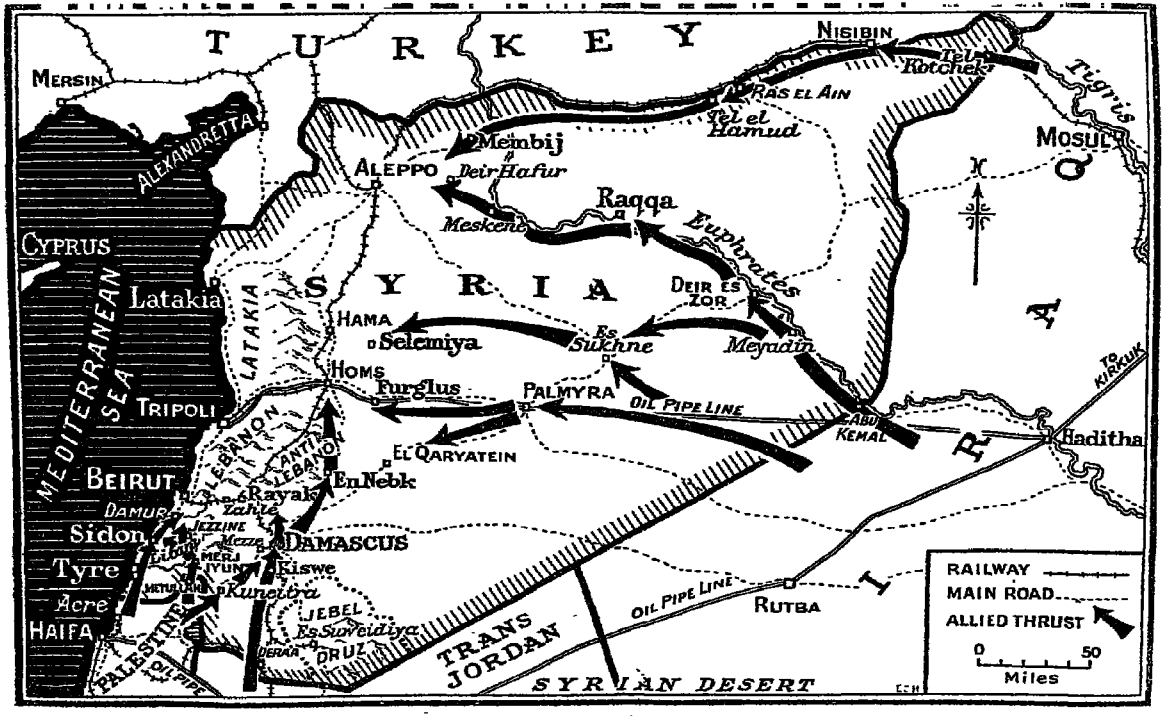
Vichy France could not, then, be regarded as a friendly or even a neutral Power; and, as the prisoner of Germany, she showed none of the dignity of her small neighbour, Belgium. But friendly or not, she could not be permitted to hand over her territories for use as bases of attack upon Britain and hence the decision to occupy Syria. At the same time it must be recognized that this decision represented merely a disagreeable necessity. It was a campaign that should have been wholly unnecessary and, when complete, it would involve a dispersion of Britain's still limited resources while giving to the northern flank of her position in Egypt a broader outer defensive area. General Wavell at this time had a force of about half a million troops at his disposal; but it is clear that, even with such a force, his dispositions could not be nearly so strong with the safety of Syria to ensure as if he could have assumed the country barred to his enemies. When the Vichy spokesmen were loudly insisting that Britain had seized upon a flimsy pretext to attack Syria, that was the sufficient answer. It was regarded as a disagreeable necessity for another reason. British statesmen recognized that if the war ended with a France alienated from Britain, even a military victory over Hitler would not eradicate the evil thing for which he stands. Germany cannot be completely destroyed; and, if her policies were to be supported in post-war Europe by France as well as Italy, Hungary and Spain, military defeat would leave her in possession of the future. For this reason British

statesmen were loth to do anything that could injure her *amour propre*; and there is sufficient evidence of the ignoring of actions to Britain's prejudice to demonstrate how completely they had taken the placating of Vichy France for their policy. The invasion of Syria was certain to give ground to all those who are in any way detached from Britain to make their case against Britain. It was indeed sheer necessity alone that launched the Syrian campaign.

Syria and Lebanon are mandated territories, Independent States placed under a Mandatory Power. The Supreme Council at San Remo assigned the mandate for Syria to France on the 25th of April 1920. The League of Nations confirmed it; but the grant was made by the Allies. This is a point of some importance, as it was suggested that the mandate lapsed with France's abandoning the League. This is, of course, not the fact. Of more importance is it that by a Treaty of Friendship and Alliance Syrian autonomy was substituted for the mandate. This Treaty was ratified by the Syrian Parliament three months after it was initialled, on the 26th of December 1936; but it was never ratified by France. On the day of the opening of the advance into Syria the British Ambassador in Egypt, in a proclamation to the Syrian peoples, stated that General Catroux, on behalf of General de Gaulle, had declared the freedom and independence of Syria and had undertaken to negotiate a Treaty to ensure these objects, and himself declared that the British Government associated themselves with this assurance and also promised that if Syria should support the Allies she would share 'all the advantages enjoyed by free countries who are associated with them. The blockade will be lifted and you may enter into immediate relations with the sterling *bloc*.' General Catroux issued a proclamation announcing his assumption of the powers and responsibilities of

the representative of 'France au Levant' and went on to declare his mission to put an end to the Mandatory régime and declare Syria free and independent. This action has been much criticized as a doubtful piece of policy on behalf of Britain and defended as a necessary bribe. It is probably no more than the reflection of the policy of the Free French who, presumably, think they can at least assume the initiative of re-declaring the arrangements which a former French Government had come to freely and the Vichy Government had stated their purpose to implement in due course. If it offended Vichy France, the Free French representatives and the British Government could comfort themselves with the reflection that anything they did which in any way hindered the Vichy Government's liberty to trade their country for reliefs, even with the full knowledge that what they sold would be used against Britain, would be equally unpalatable.

A statement was issued in London pointing out that on the 1st of July 1940 the Government had stated that they would not allow Syria and Lebanon to be occupied by any hostile Power or to be used as a base for attacks upon those countries in the Middle East which they are pledged to defend. The statement went on to maintain that the effect of the policy of the Vichy Government would be to place Syria and Lebanon under full German control. Such a policy, continued the statement, was in flagrant conflict with Marshal Pétain's recent declaration that honour forbade France to undertake anything against her former allies. The statement concluded by the announcement of the advance into Syria that morning and of the British Government's endorsement of General de Gaulle's 'promise of independence' for Syria and Lebanon. General Wavell issued a message to the French troops, which was dropped by the



5. The Campaign in Syria.

Royal Air Force, announcing that the Imperial and Free French came not as enemies but to help them against the common enemy, and appealing to them to join him.

Such was the atmosphere in which the campaign was launched; and, from the beginning, there was neither intention nor attempt to open a 'blitzkrieg' against troops who were expected and hoped to be in the main friendly. This policy will probably be justified in the long run, and it has already smoothed the transition from one administration to another; but the immediate effect was to allow General Dentz to withdraw his covering troops and take up his position upon the main line of defence.

Syria is a country of about the same area as England and Wales, generally mountainous in the west and flat desert country in the east. The character of the south is dominated by the double range of hills, the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. Mount Hermon is an offshoot of the latter. The two ranges are separated by a valley, the Beka'a or Buka'a, through which flow the two rivers of Syria, the northern (El-'Asi, the ancient) Orontes, and the southern, the Litani, which turns westward to enter the sea, north of Tyre. In its lower course it is known as Nahr el-Kasimiyeh. The mountain ranges run parallel with the coast, at times merging directly into the sea but generally leaving a narrow belt of fertile ground between the foothills and the coast, along which runs the ancient highway from Egypt, Syria being formerly the neighbour of that country. The communications are naturally built upon the physical features of the country. The main railway line branches from Aleppo to form connections with Bagdad and with the Turkish system. Southward it runs across the plain through Hama and Homs to Rayak, throwing a branch from Homs to Tripoli. This part of the system is a single track of standard gauge.

From Beirut a rack railway crosses the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, passing through the Beka'a to Damascus. From Damascus the pilgrims' railway runs south past Dera'a and the Palestinian border to Medina, and follows the ancient pilgrims' way.

France provided Syria with a number of fine roads, founded in the main upon the routes between the countries of the ancient world which are the oldest roads in history. The coastal road runs north to Latakia and thence inland to Antioch and Aleppo. A skilfully engineered road, built with steep gradients and compelled through natural features to make a number of hairpin bends, links Beirut and Damascus. From Rayak a fine road runs through Hama and Homs to Aleppo. From Jisr Bamat Yakub on the Palestine frontier a road runs through Kuneitra to Damascus, following the Syrian part of the ancient caravan route. There are also roads from Damascus to Palmyra, from Homs to Tripoli, Antioch to Aleppo and from Aleppo to Deir es Zor, on the Euphrates. In addition to numerous landing grounds there are air-ports or aerodromes at Beirut, Aleppo, Rayak, Damascus, Palmyra, Raqqa, Deir es Zor, Tripoli, Dera'a and Latakia.

The British campaign had inevitably to accommodate itself to the physical features of the country and the advance was therefore made by three main columns operating simultaneously. The most easterly advanced in the open country, east of Mount Hermoan, with Damascus as its first objective; the coastal, with Beirut as its objective, moved northward along the coast road; and a central column, whose role was to maintain contact between the other two and prevent any outflanking movement of the Vichy troops. This column had for its nominal objective Rayak, and in carrying out its role, naturally split into two with different

immediate objectives. The east and west columns had the vital objectives, the capital of the country and the headquarters of the Vichy Government; and the campaign would be decided by their fortune. Rayak would be threatened as easily by the advance from Damascus or Beirut as by frontal attack from the south.

The possibility of an advance into Syria had long been recognized; and the High Commissioner of the Vichy French Government, General Dentz, had made full preparations. He had at his disposal 33,000 troops, comprising 20 battalions of Colonial infantry and the Foreign Legion and 11 battalions of special troops recruited locally, White Russians, Syrians and Circassians. He had over eighty guns, ninety tanks and a small air force which was heavily reinforced during the campaign. About 2,000 air-borne troops also arrived during the operations. His dispositions were skilfully made. Troops were stationed at Aleppo and Tel Kotchek, on the north-eastern frontier; there were stronger forces on the line Deir es Zor, Palmyra, Homs-Tripoli; but the main concentration was on the line Kiswe (a few miles south of Damascus), Rachaya el Wadi, Jezzine, Sidon. It will be noted that this line was well withdrawn from the frontier, Kiswe, for instance, being over 50 miles to the north. Beirut was defended by a second line of strongly fortified positions above the Damur river. Only covering troops were left on the Palestinian frontier. For the propaganda side of the campaign, as soon as the frontier was crossed, the Axis personnel were sent away. German ground staffs were either flown back or evacuated by train. The Rome radio over-frankly announced on June the 26th that 110 Italians had reached Sofia from Syria and the next day the Tass Agency announced the arrival of more Italians and some Germans at Ankara. The exodus had been pretty

complete, though as late as June the 28th 200 Italians reached Ankara and 3,000 were reported to be on the Syrian frontier waiting for transport.

The Imperial Advance

General Sir Maitland Wilson, a supreme tactician, commanded the British and Imperial troops, under General Wavell, and the attack began at 2 o'clock in the morning of June the 8th. The eastern column was composed of the 5th Indian Brigade with a Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery, a squadron of the Royals and elements of the Transjordan Frontier Force. On their right were the Free French under General Catroux, with Colonel Collet's Cavalry beyond. The Indian Brigade captured Dera'a, Sheik Miskine and Ezra on the following day and the Free French, who had passed through them at Sheik Miskine, advanced to Kiswe and were held there. Kiswe is only about ten miles from Damascus; but though the Free French Forces and Collet's Cavalry reached Kiswe on June the 10th, it was obvious that the position was too strong for frontal attack. The right prong of the central column, formed by the Royal Fusiliers, advanced along the old caravan route to Damascus, and on June the 9th captured Kuneitra. The 25th Australian Brigade forming the left prong, operating from Metulla, captured the strongly fortified position of Merj'iyun on June the 11th, after heavy fighting on the frontier and continued their advance to Nabatiyeh on the road which reaches the coast about half a dozen miles south of Sidon. They had contrived to capture the crossing of the Litani and were already seven or eight miles north of it. The coastal column was composed of the 21st Australian

Brigade and the Cheshire (Mounted) Yeomanry. The Yeomanry encountered some opposition at Nakura, a few miles north of the frontier, but brushed it aside and with part of the Australian Brigade pushed inland through the hills towards the upper valley of the Litani, occupying Mazra'at ech Chouf and Mrousti, north of Jezzine. The rest of the brigade though delayed by road blocks at Iskanderoun, captured Tyre on June the 8th and reached the Litani at Kimiye. There the bridge had been destroyed and the advance could make no headway against the opposition. On the night of June the 8th a strong detachment was landed north of the river, after overcoming very heavy and skilful opposition, and the Australians were able to resume their advance across the river to a point five miles north of its mouth. This operation could not have been carried out without the close support of the Navy. The two detachments which were landed from destroyers were covered by ships of the British Navy and these in their turn were attacked by French warships. When the men landed they had to bear the well-directed fire of some batteries of French 75's and the machine-guns firing from the cover of the fruit trees. In the end the crossing of the Litani owed most to the direct assault of the Australians across the river; and the infantry could not have maintained their position but for the support of the tanks which crossed the narrows of the river by means of pontoons.

On the right the Free French force had been attempting to get round Kiswe; they had captured two positions to the east of it and were beginning to think Damascus was about to fall into their hands. There was a core of resistance north of Merj'iyun in the centre; but on the coast the Australians were only a few miles south of Sidon. About 800 Vichy French troops had surrendered or been captured. Up to

June the 13th progress at all points had been fairly good, considering the difficulties of the terrain, the wide use made of demolitions and the resistance. This was very uneven, at times stubborn and unyielding and at other times weak. But, now, the resistance showed significant signs of hardening. Attempts to parley had been used to withdraw the forward troops to the main lines of defence; and what had seemed a brilliant political decision had resulted in a military disadvantage. The Free French had long before this stated it to be their determined policy not to fight against their own countrymen and it can hardly have been a British decision to overrule so natural an attitude. There had been some idea that the Vichy French would go over to the Allies when they met such men as Colonel Collet, the former Commander of the Circassians who, with a number of his officers, had crossed the frontier, nearly a month before, to join the Free French. A few of the Vichy troops acted in that way; but the prevalent effect was a pronounced bitterness at finding themselves attacked by men of their own blood. The attempt to soften the shock of modern warfare, too, had some effect upon the Vichy troops who, finding the Allies held at Kiswe, attacked the flank of the Free French with tanks and compelled them to withdraw.

A composite of many reasons determined the Vichy Command to stiffen the resistance; and, on the night of June the 15th, they began to counter-attack. The initial results were startling. On the right they seemed incredible. There, by skilful attacks on the flank they drove two mechanized squadrons of the Transjordan Frontier Force out of Ezra and recaptured the village. This village lies about forty-five miles south of Damascus on the railway to Dera'a. At this time the Free French were at Kiswe, thirty-

five miles nearer Damascus, at a point where this winding railway bends back from the east to touch the road. Kuneitra, eight miles to the north-west, was also attacked and the Royal Fusiliers who held the town were compelled to surrender after using up all their ammunition. In the centre Merj'iyun was heavily bombarded; and the Vichy troops, attacking under cover of their artillery, penetrated into the town, in spite of the resistance of the Scots Greys. On the coastal sector the advance was held up south of Sidon by mortars and tanks. This was an unpleasant check; and it can only be understood by remembering that the British were advancing in columns, in broken country where a mobile enemy could penetrate between the various detachments. In many cases the setback was, however, purely temporary. Ezra was in the hands of the Vichy troops only a few hours before the Free French and the Transjordan Frontier Force reoccupied it. Kuneitra was retaken by the Australians and the Queen's Royal West Sussex, on the 17th.

Merj'iyun was a harder nut to crack. The Imperial counter-attack upon June the 17th did no more than gain a footing; and for a full week the Staffordshire Yeomanry and Scots Greys with the 21st Australian Brigade conducted a siege of the position. The Vichy forces held the town and the hills to the east along the Hasbaya road while the Imperial troops lay to the north and west. It was from the north they re-entered and, gradually surrounding it, took it piecemeal, against the stubborn resistance of the French Colonial Infantry and Foreign Legion. The last four days were an almost continuous battle, waged with desperate bitterness. Merj'iyun was in General Wilson's hands once more on June the 24th but the advance never made much further progress on this sector. The role of this stubborn

defence was to check the advance upon the sensitive and important flanks by holding up the centre; and it can hardly have failed to influence the development of the operations.

But by this time the position had changed fundamentally. Sidon fell, exactly a week after the beginning of the campaign, to a combined operation of the 21st Australian Brigade and the Navy; and the Imperial troops who entered the ancient town received an enthusiastic welcome from the inhabitants. Jezzine was also taken by the Australians and the Border Regiment on the same day. But both these places formed part of the Vichy forces' main line of defence; and, although the occupation of Sidon could not be resisted because of the Navy's operation against its flank and rear positions, Jezzine was not open to that leverage. The stubborn grip on Merj'iyun helped to make its retention by the Imperial forces precarious and they were quickly driven out again. The Vichy grip on the centre prevented the developments on the flanks assisting each other; but independent action had already led to the fall of Damascus. On June the 17th when the recapture of Kuneitra took place the Free French were maintaining their pressure on Kiswe, while Indian troops were attacking Mezze, the airport, three miles west of Damascus. The Imperial forces were now so close to the capital that General Wilson, on the evening of June the 18th, sent a message to General Dentz by wireless, giving him until 5.30 a.m. the next day to withdraw from the city as he had no wish to damage it; but the High Commissioner refused. The pressure was increased after this and the 5th Indian Brigade with the Royals, advancing along the foothills west of Kiswe, took Mezze after heavy fighting. The Free French, meanwhile, made an unsuccessful attack on Jebel Kelb and then advanced towards the city by way of Al Qadem. At Mezze the high road to Beirut

was commanded. The French were threatening to cut the road to the east of the Anti-Lebanon by Nebek. The Vichy forces, under this threat, withdrew, according to the Beirut wireless, to avoid 'fighting in the suburbs'. It was as good an excuse as any, for the force defending Damascus would certainly have been captured or killed if it had not withdrawn.

The ancient city of Damascus, the capital of Syria, was entered on June the 21st, less than a fortnight from the opening of the campaign; and by this time the main defensive position was broken at both ends, though the Vichy troops were fighting might and main to retain the chief elements of the centre. But the position had deteriorated more fundamentally. A strong column had begun to advance from Iraq; and now one can see how necessary it was for Britain to secure control of that country. If it had been in alien hands not only would this advance have been impossible but it is even difficult to think that any operations in Syria could have been carried out safely. The first column to cross the western frontier was composed almost entirely of famous British regiments, Household Cavalry, the Wilts Yeomanry, the Warwickshire Yeomanry, and the Essex Regiment with a Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery, part of the Arab Legion and the Royal Air Force armoured cars. Its way of advance was along the Pipe Line to Tripoli. On the day after the fall of Damascus, it had reached Palmyra, an important aerodrome; and the evacuation of Damascus was as much due to the threat to the foundations of the Vichy force's position in Syria as it was to the immediate possibility of encirclement. This was by no means complete on June the 20th when the capital was evacuated; but the strong force advancing rapidly across the desert threatened to cut off in southern Syria the whole of General

Dentz's force. Palmyra was very strongly defended not only against air attack but also on the ground. It was buttressed by a number of pill boxes and held by a small but stubborn garrison of a company of the Foreign Legion, half of them Germans and half Russians, and a Desert Company. Part of the British force encircled Palmyra while patrols struck south-west to El Qaryatein where they linked up with the Free French who had pushed up towards the north-east from Damascus.

This was not the only threat that emerged over the eastern horizon. The 10th Indian division, on July the 1st, advanced from Abu Kemal, on the Euphrates, up the river to Deir es Zor and its patrols struck due west to achieve contact with the Palmyra unit at Es Sukhne where the Arab Legion under Glubb Pasha, on July the 1st, accounted for seventeen Vichy A.F.V.'s from Deir es Zor. One other column was to complete the triple thrust from the east. Part of the 10th Indian division cleared up the salient between Turkey and Iraq, capturing Tel Kotchek, and Nisibin, on the railway from Bagdad and Mosul, and compelling the Vichy forces to fall back westward. This detachment cleared the extreme north of the country, where it adjoins Turkey. Thus there began to develop a multiple threat to the main communications of the Vichy troops in Syria, from north of Aleppo to Homs. The Palmyra column offered the most immediate threat, since it was advancing in force directly upon Homs which was the junction of the Damascus-Rayak and the Tripoli lines. An advance westward from Homs would soon pen all the Vichy forces in the south.

But the resistance continued to be stubborn for some time. In the heart of the Jebel Druse country, well to the south of Damascus, lay the citadel of Es Suweidiya, connected to Ezra by railway. A considerable body of Druse

cavalry had deserted to the Allies and surrounded the small Vichy force at Es Suweidiya till the Armistice sounded. The Druses had never accepted French rule and this defection of so large a body of their cavalry weakened the right of the Vichy position; but the stubborn character of the Vichy fighting may be gathered from this stand, besieged, with hardly the barest chance of relief. Elsewhere, despite bitter fighting, the Allied position continued to improve. Five days after the fall of Damascus, the Free French had advanced up the road east of the Anti-Lebanon to En Nebk, more than half-way to Homs. There, on the last day of the month, they beat off a counter-attack and destroyed four tanks. It cannot be said that the Vichy defence was any less skilful than it was stubborn. Homs was a vital junction and the Allied troops were held at a comfortable distance from it, in spite of their converging advance. At one other point advance could not be permitted, while the Vichy Command retained power to control the operations at all. The main defensive system had now broken down completely; but below Beirut a second defensive line had been constructed above the Damur river to check the advance on General Dentz's headquarters.

The advance in the area west of Damascus continued steadily. The Leicesters and the Queens had captured Qatana, a strong tactical position which lies about twelve miles south of the capital and west of the old caravan road, on June the 23rd and, with the K.O.R.R., they moved westward into the hills to cut the Damascus-Beirut road and seized the southern slopes of the Jebel Mazar which overlooks road and railway. But, north of the Jebel Mazar, the Vichy forces held the road and the Beka'a, as far south as Hasbaya, with the Lebanon through Harout, south of Bet ed Din to the coast just south of Damur. Some idea of the

skill and stubbornness of the Vichy resistance may be gathered from the fact that the Imperial troops south of Damar were some twenty-six miles to the north-west of Hasbaya which lies only six miles to the north-east of Merj'iyun. Beaten out of that strong position after a week's fighting the defence stood defiantly only a few miles beyond and held the advance on the Damascus-Beirut road while east and west it had made significant headway.

On the coast the advance was pressed by the 7th Australian division while inland the 23rd Infantry Brigade, including the Border Regiment and Durham Light Infantry, which had reinforced it, faced the Colonial infantry and Foreign Legion. On the Damur General Dentz's position was one of great natural strength and it had been very elaborately fortified. Its weakness was that it was open to enfilading fire from the sea and, although the small Vichy naval forces had made more vigorous attempts to drive off the ships of Admiral Cunningham's squadron than had the strong Italian fleet in the Libyan operations, they had suffered very heavily and were in no shape to assist the land defence. Nevertheless the British Command realized that the direct attack on these positions, west and east of the mountain ranges and up the valley between, must be costly and the advance slow if left to itself. It tended to develop into positional warfare which, possibly inevitable on occasion, is barren of strategic results and, in the larger sense, unproductive. It was for this reason that General Wavell had restored the war to manœuvre by his columns in the east. It was their threat rather than the immediate compulsion of the local advance that conditioned the operations over the whole area of the Syrian battlefield.

Palmyra surrended on July the 3rd and the troops pressed on towards Furqlus. The 10th Indian division was approach-

ing Deir es Zor and the 6th division by July the 10th had captured the whole of Jebel Mazar. In the neighbourhood of Merj'iyun the advance was still held; but in the hills to the west the Cheshire Yeomanry entered Mrousti and an Australian infantry battalion recaptured Jezzine. Three days before, the Australian infantry, assisted by a bombardment from the sea, crossed the Damur river against a fierce opposition and the next day were in contact with the main position defending Beirut. On July the 9th, also with the assistance of the Navy, they outflanked and captured the whole of the Vichy line of defence beyond the Damur and advanced to Khalde, five miles south of Beirut. Tanks, guns and many prisoners were taken. The next day General Dentz requested terms for an armistice, and at midnight on July the 11th the 'Cease Fire' was ordered in Syria. It seems that the first request for an armistice was made on July the 8th but, communicated through the United States Consul, it had a circuitous path. The application was even mentioned on July the 9th in the House of Commons. General Dentz evidently wished to anticipate the capture of Beirut; and the events which occurred on July the 9th showed that it was imminent. He was driven eventually to approach the British Command.

The whole of his position was by this time crumbling to disaster. On the Turkish frontier the Indian troops had penetrated to Tel Abiad, 150 miles from Aleppo. On the Euphrates they had reached Raqqa on July the 9th, about 155 miles from Homs, 140 miles from Hama and less than 110 from Aleppo. On the Palmyra road the British column was only about 25 miles from Homs which the Free French, approaching from the south, were threatening at a distance of 48 miles. The converging advance from the east had swept the country clear of all Vichy troops up to Selimiya,

some 20 miles south-east of Hama and 30 miles due north of Furqlus. It would have needed a sanguine spirit to discover the vestige of a hope in such a situation and General Dentz in asking for an armistice merely chose the less humiliating of the two alternatives before him: the complete rout and capture of his whole force or surrender. The very fact that a solid knot of country defined by Khalde—Bet ed Din, the two Lebanon ranges, Merj'iyun and Dimas was solidly held by strong Vichy forces suggested disaster under the developing convergence of General Wilson's columns.

General Dentz had still nearly 27,000 troops. Some 2,000 prisoners had been captured and his casualties must, therefore, have been about 8,000. Almost the whole of his air force had been destroyed by the Royal Air Force, either on the ground at Palmyra, Rayak, Beirut and Aleppo, or in combat. Without the assistance of the Royal Air Force, both in close and direct support, the campaign must have lacked a decisive element of its success; and the Navy, as usual, had been of immense assistance on the coastal sector. The British and Imperial casualties were comparatively small because the forces, though considerably reinforced about the time of the fall of Damascus, were never large.

The success of the campaign, as of that in Libya, did not rest on any large superiority of force. It turned upon skilful manœuvre, to the success of which the very stubbornness of the defence under direct attack inevitably contributed, as it always must. It is not good to stand on the order of one's going when an advance against the flanks may prevent one's going at all.

The Convention terminating hostilities was signed on July the 14th in the barracks at Acre called after the Admiral Sidney Smith who had compelled Napoleon to

raise the siege of the town. The terms were exceedingly generous. Britain had no quarrel with France and, first and last, acted towards the Vichy Government with great forbearance. The French compelled General Wilson to exercise his right to retain French officers to secure the return of Allied prisoners of war. An unnecessary conflict could not even be terminated in decency; and it was not until the end of August that the British prisoners were returned. Even then General Wilson had formally to protest at the ill-treatment they had suffered.

CHAPTER 12

The Battle of the Atlantic

What was called the 'Battle of the Atlantic' was actually the continual attack of the enemy on the operation of our sea power. Effective sea power must secure the country from sea-borne invasion, assure to its shipping the freedom of the seas and deny that freedom completely to the enemy. It was because the freedom of the seas meant, in effect, the ability to enter or leave the home ports from the Atlantic that this challenge to freedom of movement on the seas was called the 'Battle of the Atlantic'. But it involved more than that. It was necessary for the purpose of conducting military operations and maintaining the historic naval bases that British shipping should be free to cross and re-cross the Mediterranean and the outer oceans. It was further necessary to deny the enemy freedom of transport in the Mediterranean and the oceans of the world. Shipping losses, therefore, occurred far beyond the confines of the Atlantic and yet are included in the figures associated with the so-called 'Battle of the Atlantic'.

During the six months after the capture of Benghazi, this struggle of the enemy to destroy our shipping and ours to destroy his continued with unabated vigour. The enemy, of course, enjoyed very little freedom indeed in the outer seas. The blockade was practically complete as far as con-

finement to the Home Waters was concerned, though, after the capture of Norway and the defeat of France, more shipping than ever made its way to the Atlantic. It had never achieved any significant volume; but for ships that were considered necessary to have at large in the Atlantic it was more than ever possible to find a way; and the coastal traffic was freer and covered longer distances. With patience and care to cover the better watched stretches of the North Sea, ships might make their way from Narvik to Holland. The attempt of *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* to reach Brest, in order to take over the duties of raiding commerce which *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were compelled to abandon through the attentions of the Royal Air Force, shows very strikingly the measure of success that might be expected. *Bismarck* was sunk; but *Prinz Eugen* escaped and was not found for a fortnight though warships and aeroplanes were seeking it all the time. Any kind of regular trade was out of the question; but this spasmodic, thin, precarious trickle of traffic continued.

In the Mediterranean, the enemy freedom of action was wider. The enemy aeroplanes overlooking the Sicilian Channel could not prevent ships properly convoyed from crossing even the Narrows; and, when the capture of Crete created a second narrows, British shipping could still make its way with adequate protection. The Italian Navy had suffered too severely at the hands of the British squadrons to have any stomach for challenging shipping, and the aeroplanes alone could not entirely check it. But, after the fall of Crete, the enemy's freedom was enlarged and that of British shipping very much restricted. In spite of the efforts of British submarines, traffic between Italy and Tripolitania could not be prevented. The recoil in Libya was due to this; and the reinforcement continued throughout the

spring and summer. The Royal Air Force repeatedly bombed the Tripolitanian ports with devastating effect. On one occasion, in April, the bulk of a Panzer division with munition ships and escort was destroyed for the loss of one British destroyer. Numbers of ships were sunk or damaged in crossing. They were sunk and damaged in harbour. The harbour works upon which the loading and unloading depended were bombed. The stores brought over were bombed. But, in spite of everything that could be done, the traffic persisted and the reinforcement continued and accumulated.

It is important to bear this in mind, since the ports of Britain were subjected to the same treatment, as we have seen; and the persistent bombardment must have had some effect in crippling the shipping, destroying the stores and damaging the apparatus for loading and unloading the ships. The attack spread over a greater number of greater ports could not have an appreciable effect if the attack upon a smaller number of Libyan ports, so much poorer in equipment, did not stop the Mediterranean traffic.

It was estimated that the total enemy tonnage lost (captured or scuttled) up to July the 10th was 3,391,000 tons. The total amount of British, Allied and Neutral shipping sunk in the same period, according to the Admiralty reports, was 7,295,208 tons. This is, of course, a very much larger total; but the *net* total was, perhaps, smaller than that of the enemy loss since captures of enemy shipping, new building and transfers kept the total small. But the volume of enemy sinkings has little revelance to the effect of the Allied 'blockade'. There can be no doubt that the enemy was suffering the shortage of many commodities, in spite of the accumulated stocks with which he entered the war, the plunder of occupied countries, the purchases from

countries beyond the reach of the blockade, like Russia, and the development of the discovery of the last war—*ersatz*. In the matter of fats, heavy oils, petrol and rubber, as well as certain minerals, he could not fail to feel the pinch. These were necessaries, and he was compelled to do without them and to that extent the blockade was effective, though by his attack upon Russia he hoped to secure a sufficiently large and rich territory to defy the blockade and even raise a challenge to the Allied position in the Near East. Up to the end of July the sole effect of his attack upon Russia was to exhaust still more his stocks of these precious commodities. The shipping that slipped from one harbour in occupied territory to another, or from such a harbour to Germany or Italy, represented trade between the impoverished. The neutrals could not give what they were no longer allowed to import; and, consequently, the commerce merely postponed the critical point of the blockade. During this period it became more and more clear that of itself the blockade could not bring Germany to defeat; but no-one except the thoughtless sanguine ever held that view. If the process of attrition was slowed down somewhat, it was reinforced by other means.

It was the shipping losses of the *Allies* that were the really important feature of the war. From the first these were inevitably of more critical importance to Britain than the British blockade could be to Germany, because the former had come to depend so largely upon foreign produce for its very life and because its military operations abroad depended upon shipping. Without a certain volume of shipping constantly leaving British ports for the markets of the world it would have been impossible to pay for the necessary imports. Without a steady volume of shipping entering her ports Britain could never benefit by the war potential of

the United States. The volume of risk though never measured, was immense; and the enemy losses could not have represented a hundredth of that risk.

British, Allied and Neutral losses fall naturally into three phases as judged by this standard. The first comprises those months before the enemy had possession of the Channel ports, Belgium and Holland. During this period the monthly losses averaged 181,335 tons per month for nine months. This was an imposing figure; but it represented a loss that could be borne without discomfort. After the fall of France and the Low Countries the losses became at once much heavier, and the monthly average was 410,057 tons. The next period covers the six months of the present year during which Hitler was, according to his threats, doing his utmost. In this period the losses were 465,466 tons. This is a very instructive figure because it covers a period which involved exceptional losses in the eastern Mediterranean during military operations. Yet it will be noted that the average is only some 55,000 tons per month higher than the preceding period; and it is supposed to include the months when Hitler was doing his worst. Without the exceptional losses due to the military operations, it is certain that the monthly average would have been lower.

The actual monthly figures, as issued by the Admiralty, are given below. When they were issued it was stated that the shipping losses would no longer be issued at regular intervals 'because valuable information is by this means given to the enemy'. This is undoubtedly true; but since these figures are available they will repay study. It will be noticed at once that the June figures are very much lower than those for May; and the losses during July were among the lowest monthly records. There can be no doubt that much success had been attained in the defence against the

German attack. The attack by surface vessels had almost entirely ceased; but the U-boats and aeroplanes continued their offensive.

MERCANTILE TONNAGE LOSSES DURING 1941

	British		*Allied*	
1941	*No.*	*Gr. tons*	*No.*	*Gr. tons*
January	41	205,473	17	101,296
February	70	275,574	17	68,932
March	85	348,118	32	141,043
April	72	346,208	56	220,965
May	77	380,035	21	95,978
June	52	228,284	19	82,727

	Neutral		*Total*	
	No.	*Gr. tons*	*No.*	*Gr. tons*
January	1	2,962	59	309,731
February	2	6,378	89	350,884
March	7	26,602	124	515,763
April	7	22,100	135	589,273*
May	6	21,834	104	497,847*
June	8	18,285	79	329,296

In order that there may be some standard by which to measure these figures, it can be stated that during the whole of the year 1917 the weekly losses averaged 120,000 tons, i.e., over 480,000 tons per month; for seven months they averaged 150,000 weekly, over 600,000 tons per month; and for the critical month of April they were at the average of 220,000 tons. During this one month the sinkings totalled 881,027 tons. During that year, in fact, the total tonnage of

* Including losses suffered in the Eastern Mediterranean during military operations.

shipping sunk was almost as much as the amount sunk in the whole period of the present war up to the end of June. When the losses had been reduced to something like the present total it was considered that the crisis was over.

The present emphasis upon the seriousness of the sinkings, then, seems to require some explanation. It is, of course, true that when Britain was going through her crisis in 1917 the United States of America was also at war; and that made a great difference. But this alone will not explain the reason for the constant references to the gravity of the Battle of the Atlantic. Britain depends no more upon foreign larders than she did then; and yet the rationing is much stricter and more comprehensive than it was in the year 1917. British industrial capacity has not fallen off since the last war. Indeed, the experience then gained has been of advantage. What then is the cause of the greater gravity attached to very much lower losses?

It is partly due to the greater extent of the British war effort abroad. There is a much larger force in the Near East than in the last war; and although a considerable amount of supply can be done from eastern bases that at once subtracts from the volume available for the use of Britain. It is impossible to feed over half a million men and amass sufficient supplies of munitions of all sorts for their use without a great deal of shipping. There is also the Far East which must use a great amount of shipping. Moreover, there are in this war machines which take up much space in addition to the artillery always necessary. Tanks are unwieldly objects that take up much room and aeroplanes may take up even more, if they are to arrive safely at their destination. In both these directions the volume of shipping required has been heavily increased; and with the claims of Russia to satisfy there is every likelihood of an increased call upon it.

But not only has the volume greatly increased: the time required in transit has been increased. The inability to use the Mediterranean inevitably increases the time taken in transit from Britain. Ships must for safety's sake go round the Cape; and the increase in time is very considerable. Take, for instance, a voyage to Bombay. If this goes through the Mediterranean it will take only about three-fifths of the time taken to go round the Cape. If, for instance, we take the voyage *via* the Suez Canal to be about twenty-one days it will take thirty-five round the Cape. If the ships are moving in convoy they will, in any case, travel at a slower speed; and the consequence is that the net effect is the same as if the shipping losses had been much higher.

There is another direction in which the volume of shipping appears to suffer a shrinkage. The time occupied in turning round in port tends to increase. Any damage done to the railways makes the transit of export goods or fuel to the ports longer, and damage to the ports themselves puts a brake on the turn round. Derricks may be damaged, winches or power plant; and if any or all have suffered there is a certainty of some delay. As we have seen the Germans have concentrated their attention on the main ports; and, in the almost incessant attacks of the winter and early spring, it is impossible that some damage was not done. Moreover, there is the question of ships damaged, though not sunk, either in port or on the high seas. And, finally, the destruction of the houses in which the dockers live must have imposed a brake on the turn round. Each of these causes may account for only a fractional delay; but, cumulatively, they make a considerable total of days lost, and this has much the same effect as if the volume of shipping has been cut down.

No one can regret that we are fighting in so many quar-

ters of the world more heavily than in the last war. While we are at war, we must meet and attack the enemy wherever we find him; and, if the expeditions sent to Greece and Crete occasioned the loss of shipping, and the large forces retained in the Near East make great calls upon it, at least in these directions we have been carrying out military operations. But it is not at all clear that the time spent in port or in repair cannot be considerably shortened. There has already been some speeding up. But more can be done; and, when it is fully realized that a shortening of the time occupied in these necessary functions has the same effect as placing more ships in commission, no doubt it will be done.

That it is rather the increasing calls upon our shipping than the mere effect of the losses, though these inevitably bear heavily, was shown by some figures quoted by Sir Archibald Sinclair on September the 3rd. It has been difficult from the first to secure a true measure of the effect of the German offensive against British shipping because there was no means of discovering the degree of risk. There was no information of the number of ships entering and leaving British ports daily, or the number passing through the danger zones. Sir Archibald stated that 'in the last ten weeks more than 850,000 tons of merchandise have been imported into Britain every week'. Now that is a significant figure; and, for the first time, we have some accurate measure of our success in the 'Battle of the Atlantic'. Even if we are not to assume that the weekly average of imports has always been as high as that, it is reasonable to assume that it has been of that order; and the conclusion throws a new light upon the Battle of the Atlantic.

Some assistance has been given by the patrols of the American Navy. Mr. Roosevelt has moved the borders of the western hemisphere as far north as Iceland to some

point east of the line drawn from the United States past Greenland to that island. On this patrolled area it is unlikely the Germans will dare to encroach, until in desperation they decide to go down in a blaze of glory by defying the United States. The effect of patrolling this area, therefore, must be to narrow down the area which the British Navy has to police in order to safeguard shipping bringing supplies to and taking exports from the United Kingdom. Some assistance has also been given by Russia in immobilizing the bulk of Germany's air fleets on the eastern front. The bombers which before operated so heavily against shipping entering or leaving British harbours, and against the railways and ports of Britain, have been otherwise employed since the campaign against Russia began. It is impossible that that withdrawal can have had no significant effect upon shipping losses. But, although it is Germany's way to concentrate upon one campaign at a time, there can be little doubt that the submarines are still at work against British shipping; and it is to be noted that the June shipping losses, which show so marked a fall, include three weeks before the Russian campaign began. The causes of the fall are probably many. In the first place the surface raiders have been fewer during the summer months. *Bismarck* came south with *Prinz Eugen* to take the place of the two great warships which are immobilized in Brest. The elimination of the surface raider has had a significant effect upon the safety of shipping approaching and leaving Britain. It may be only a temporary condition; but many ships which might otherwise have been sunk are now working busily between Britain and the rest of the world. But this is not the only reason for the improvement in the shipping situation. The British Navy is a very efficient organization and it never fails to learn by experience. By this

time it has discovered many ways in which to cope with the U-boat and the bombing aeroplanes.

The June figure for shipping losses was 329,296 tons, a very much better figure than the figure for May; but it is still far too high. If the losses continued at this rate the total for the year would not be far short of four million tons. It is not a *net* figure, be it remembered; but it is still much too high. In the last war the world's shipping output was 2,937,786 in the year 1917 and 4,308,821 in 1918. The first figure is under, and only the second over the present annual rate of shipping losses. It was only during the second quarter of the year 1918 that the world's shipping output overtook the losses; and this result was achieved by two processes: the shipping losses were brought down and the building was steadily increased. It will probably be the same again.

But the danger of the hour is that we have not yet seriously begun the defeat of Germany. The way of deliverance, the victory in this battle of the Atlantic lies through building. There is no escape from this conclusion. Whichever way the problem is faced it turns us back upon the necessity for ever more building. The Navy needs more escort vessels. As the needs of shipping have drawn British vessels farther and farther afield they have placed an ever greater premium upon shipping; and the Navy could save more and sink more of the pirate vessels that prey upon shipping if they had a vastly increased supply of escort vessels. The special types required are known and the only problem is how to secure that they are built before the next spurt in the submarine campaign. The United States does much to help; but even if they were at war by our side, the need for small craft, cruisers and destroyers would still be paramount.

The need for more shipping to make up the margin between shipping sunk and replaced, once more throws us back on the question of building. Standardized shipping can be mass produced and the plans for so doing are under way; but time presses and more ships and still more ships are required. The Russian campaign must make further calls upon shipping in order that Russia shall receive the supplies she needs to make good the enormous wastage suffered in the titanic battles which appear to continue without cessation in the east. There is a further need for shipping that is seldom referred to. The defeat of Germany will require land operations against her; and this must entail a landing upon the continent of Europe, the protection of the troops while landing, and the maintenance of communications between the expeditionary force and the home bases. In every stage of this great adventure it is shipping that is needed. The specialized vessels for the actual landing operations must be built in great numbers. The best type has presumably been thought out carefully, and probably many are already built. Then, once more, the number of escort vessels that will be called into play will be large and must be ready before the operation is begun. A successful landing having been made, the escort vessels cannot be withdrawn; they will be needed until the enemy is driven away from the Channel, as far north as Holland. The communications cannot be cut without imperilling the expedition. There will be a need of other vessels to cover the landing and the operations, until a sufficiently deep and broad bridgehead has been conquered.

The scale of building achieved in the year 1918 has been pointed out. It is not unlimited; and there are new needs in this war for machines that must compete with the building programme. Yet there is no means by which the Battle of

the Atlantic can be won more easily or won at all. The problem of safe convoy is simply one of providing adequate escort. Aircraft protection against aircraft attack can be provided by means of aeroplanes carried by warships. The bomber should not be able to compete against the aircraft carried by warships, in addition to the anti-aircraft guns they have as their normal equipment.

The trend of the 'Battle of the Atlantic' has been very much in our favour during the spring and summer months; but the order of the sinkings does not afford any soil for complacency. If these figures do not suggest grave danger, they at least imply a limitation of our war effort; and the probability is that the war overseas will call more and more upon supply from the home bases. The solution of the problem while it certainly depends, in theory, upon the vast organization of building, actually depends upon the full development of every means by which shipping can be more fully used, better safeguarded and replaced, at one and the same time. Under any circumstances it would be impossible for the ship-building capacity of the United States, added to our own, to supply all the shipping needed for replacement of ships sunk, for the enlargement of the shipping fleet needed to meet every call that is being made upon it, for the special types needed in convoy, invasion and the rest. The need is endless. All that can be practically hoped is that a combination of every sort of attack upon the problem will provide a sufficiently adequate solution in a reasonable time.

It is probably a complete mistake, to some extent it is an admitted mistake, to represent the problem of victory as easier than in fact it is. From the first our strategy has rested upon the sufficiently complete functioning of Sea Power. For the purposes of ensuring our safety it seems

reasonable to conclude that this part of its action is adequate to the situation. But the problem of securing victory has still to be solved. Here, once more, the British strategy depends upon Sea Power; but it makes upon it calls that cannot be met at present. It is the measuring of our Sea Power against that test that suggests the danger. At present we are endeavouring to meet the needs of the defensive and at the same time do what we can to conduct the present offensive and prepare the way for the grand offensive that will lead to victory. It would be the worst of follies to under-estimate the magnitude of this task. 'The Battle of the Atlantic' might be lost. It can never be considered won until the German armies sue for peace.

CHAPTER 13

The Mixture as Before

Mr. Churchill remained and remains the one man in whom the nation has complete confidence. It is an irrelevance, though a matter of interest, that he appears to command almost as much approval in the United States. In both cases the reason is his singleness of purpose in prosecuting the war to a successful issue. At times criticism found a voice about different members of his Government and the Prime Minister, while wisely appearing to bow to them, did very little to change its general make-up. The innovations he made were designed to give better effect to its purposes and to meet emergent needs. When Mr. MacDonald was sent to Canada as High Commissioner to fill the place of Sir Gerald Campbell, sent to the United States to control the News Service, the occasion was taken to give the cards a shuffle. Lord Moyne was sent to the Colonial Office and Mr. Ernest Brown became Minister of Health. On May the 1st Colonel Moore-Brabazon, who was later to be the target for the sort of mischief-making which seems inseparable from a certain type of mind, became Minister of Aircraft Production in place of Lord Beaverbrook who, another innovation, became Minister of State. Mr. F. J. Leathers, a newcomer, became Minister of

Shipping and Transport with a peerage, and Mr. R. H. Cross was appointed High Commissioner in Australia. In this appointment, as in that of Mr. MacDonald, there was evidence of an attempt to meet the call for closer contact between the Dominions and the Government. The demand, in the form in which it was stated, was impossible to satisfy, though the core of it was completely natural. Constitutional changes had been effected to meet some of the inevitable effects of the developing independence of the Dominions. The Prime Ministers of one Dominion after another visited England and were admitted to the deliberations of the Cabinet. This, which at least gave Britain the inspiring stimulus of such men as Mr. Menzies, Mr. Mackenzie King and Mr. Fraser, was not a perfect solution of the problems involved in a war partnership. The Prime Minister could neither remain in England with prudence nor remain thousands of miles away with comfort. The arrangement of High Commissioners of sufficient standing and the periodical visits of the Prime Ministers who were normally in constant contact with their own High Commissioners seems a cumbrous mechanism to effect a delicate contact; but it worked satisfactorily.

Lord Beaverbrook became Minister of Supply on June the 29th, and this appointment was associated with that of Sir Andrew Duncan as President of the Board of Trade and Mr. Oliver Lyttelton to special duties abroad. The nature of these duties was disclosed a few days later. General Wavell was appointed Commander-in-Chief in India, General Auchinleck Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East and Mr. Lyttelton Minister of State and a Member of the War Cabinet to represent them in the Middle East. Even this innovation was accepted, after a little criticism, and the machinery of government rode a little more

smoothly than before. The Middle East was (and is) increasing in importance, and political questions complicated the military situation. There were even military questions which should not have been left to press upon the shoulders of the Commander-in-Chief, and the difficulty was met by the appointment of General Sir Robert Haining, the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to be Intendant General in the Middle East. Mr. Lyttelton's role was to concert 'on behalf of the Cabinet' the measures necessary for the prosecution of the war in the Middle East 'other than the conduct of military operations'. Sir Robert Haining was to deal with the complicated administrative problems which are bound to arise in that area.

General Wavell did not, therefore, simply change places with General Auchinleck. The latter was never to exercise the complicated military, administrative and political functions which had fallen upon General Wavell, and the latter was not to take over merely the important duties of the chief command in India. Little by little there began to emerge the outlines of a practical defensive scheme for the Middle East. General Wavell's writ was to run up to the western frontiers of Iraq and take in the defence of India in a comprehensive sense which has never been projected before. Happily he did not hand over his command of the Near East until it was seen that his operations in Syria were moving to the complete success that was necessary for the safety of Egypt. He was the one General whose reputation ran high among the Germans. He had not only had the opportunity to do great things, he had actually done them. If he had made mistakes, it has to be remembered that German military training accepts them, and overlooks everything except the inaction or pusillanimity which characterized the Italian generals he defeated. Other British

generals may have suffered in the general estimation from the lack of opportunity.

These administrative changes made little difference to the life of the nation; but there were others occurring about this time that did. The Budget introduced on April the 7th was the heaviest ever submitted to any nation and it spread its burden very widely over the whole population. Even the smaller incomes were not left untouched though these and the considerably higher were subject to deductions part of which would be repayable after the war. The purpose of this novel expedient was to turn another screw against the ever-present danger of inflation. Whatever the purpose the imposition was extraordinarily heavy. The standard rate already high was again raised and now stands at 10s. in £, and this with super-tax made the burden on the higher incomes almost incredibly heavy. Thus, under the new rates, it will be impossible to retain a net income of £5,000 a year unless one's gross income is £66,000 per year. It does not need a great deal of experience to convince anyone that many establishments cannot be supported on those terms and the only means by which drastic retrenchment can be avoided is by using more and more capital. This will involve a smaller yield in subsequent years and it is in effect a capital levy.

Bearing this in mind it becomes remarkable how well the Budget was received. There were of course those who think the rich are not sufficiently taxed and insisted that some time or other a capital levy must be imposed. Thus Mr. Pethick Lawrence urged that a capital levy should be imposed immediately after the war to avert the evils of an immense National Debt. Only, he said, if two premises were made, the imposition of a capital levy and safeguards against inflation would he regard as fair the burdens now

imposed upon our people. A Conservative Member approached the matter from a completely different angle. He stated that after he had paid his taxes and the money he had promised to pay under contracts for insurances, for the education of his children, the rent and rates of a London house he could not afford to live in, and his political expenses, he was left with £1 a week per head for each of the persons dependent on him. The new Budget had reduced that sum to 4s. a head. He felt we should have to undergo some surgical operation, such as a capital levy, if we were to escape the self-frustration of a closed economy after the war. Despite personal considerations he supported the Budget wholeheartedly, particularly because it contained that element of mass sacrifice for which he had often appealed. These two speeches from completely different angles give a not unfair suggestion of the manner in which the Budget was received. One final extract sums up the prevalent attitude. Dr. Russell Thomas said, 'I am a lover of liberty and I hate regimentation, but I am prepared in the name of liberty to hand my powers over to a group of honourable men so that they shall hold my liberty in trust till the war is over.'

That expressed a very general attitude. Many people could not pretend to know what kind of world they were preparing. The soaring National Debt could not fail to be a nightmare. But the present burden was sufficient, and they were prepared to take on trust the intention of the Government to administer the national economy as best they could. The one thing which the Budget demonstrates beyond a doubt is the complete determination of all classes to support the war at all costs. It is frequently suggested in certain quarters that income tax cannot be too high, as if every increase does not bear with it a terrible burden of suffering

for innocent people who have to live on small incomes and whose expenses seem intractable. The fact that these fresh impositions were universally received with acquiescence, if not with positive approval, suggests the depth of national spirit on all sides.

Another change which also affected everyone was the clothes rationing scheme which came into force on June the 1st. It cannot seriously be said that the new restrictions bore over hardly upon anyone; but they undoubtedly invaded everyone's liberty of action, and once again the scheme was received as if it were a kind of joke. Almost every conceivable object of wear was henceforth subject to control by coupon; and the only people who escaped the full pressure of the scheme were those who had for some reason started with an excessively good outfit. There were special arrangements for exceptional cases, such as growing children; but the scheme applied universally and was accepted as necessary.

A development which became more noticeable during this period was the pressure upon the small trader. This came almost as a by-product of the rationing scheme and was represented as a measure of economy. For purposes of distribution it was held to be uneconomical to preserve the small retailer. His tendency to disappear was not received with the general regret the matter deserved. Some perfunctory criticisms were made but there are far too many people who appear to think that the perfection of a concern depends upon its size, that the bigger and more universal an undertaking the better it is certain to be, and that the more personal liberty of choice can be restricted the better for everyone. It is odd that in a war that is caused by the complete centralization of power in a few hands there should be so many people in Britain who appear to favour

the same kind of development here. Cries continued to be heard from the Left for more compulsion, as if liberty were a sort of immoral indulgence only supported by the capitalists. One would have thought that the dangers of allowing too much power to pass into the hands of a few men, beyond the control or criticism of the many, were sufficiently obvious. The Labour Party professed to object to the totalitarianism of both sides with equal vigour; yet it could not fail to be noticed that whenever opportunity arose the cry from that side rose for compulsion.

There were certain repercussions of the Russian Alliance that made their appearance with growing vigour as time went on. It was inevitable that many things should be forgotten about Russia because she fought so well. It was also inevitable that the Communists should again raise their heads and renew their propaganda. This would not have been altogether an evil, if there had been any trace of sense in the direction it assumed. It was not long before there began an outcry for help to be sent to Russia. The next step was to suggest that help should have been sent and was being withheld. This was a dangerous argument; and it seems incredible that many of those who used it can have understood the use to which it might be put by the Germans. The propaganda was the more mischievous in that it was wholly unnecessary and, of course, flagrantly unjust. The Government were as alive as anyone to the need to help our ally as speedily and as fully as possible. But the difficulties in the way were enormous. During the last war the difficulties were not overcome in time to save Russia. The conditions were considerably better on this occasion since a Russian Mission arrived in London hardly a fortnight after the opening of the German attack, and it was therefore possible to learn what Russia most needed. More-

over, through the Persian Gulf and the Far East, help could be sent; but it could be neither immediate nor massive. Russia had been forced into the war. If she had joined the allies voluntarily at her own time it might have been possible to concert measures to help more rapidly.

It had been discovered from hard experience how slowly reinforcements of men and material could be sent to the Near East and to dispatch them to Russia involved an additional distance that could not be ignored. These considerations tended to be brushed aside, particularly by those who had at best remained aloof from the war until Russia was involved. Moreover, it was not long before the propaganda developed into sheer absurdity. It began to be urged that we should 'strike in the west and finish the war' now, at the same time as it was insisted that every material help should be given to Russia. Such a conjunction of demands entirely failed to reflect the actual conditions governing the situation. If an Expeditionary Force were to be sent to the Continent it would require all the material available and would also involve the use of all the shipping that could be spared as well as the warships for escort. It is quite impossible at the same time to use the material and the ships to carry it with the warships to convoy them to the assistance of Russia. It may, of course, be urged that the outcry even in its exaggerations and absurdities would have the effect of bringing pressure to bear upon the Government. But such a contention suggests that the Government were not inclined to meet as fully as possible the formal demands of a nation formally admitted as an ally; and it was in this direction that the real mischief lay. Russia understood Britain even less than Britain understood her. She had from the first been suspicious of the attitude and determination of Britain, or perhaps the pact with Germany would never

have been signed and kept with such fidelity. The propaganda that suggested the reluctance of Britain to assist Russia as fully as was possible was used by Germany to suggest that perfidious Albion was again betraying her ally; and coming at a time when that ally was undergoing the most terrible attack that any army has ever borne it could hardly fail to have some effect. It was an unconscious act of cruelty to a nation the people who initiated the propaganda professed to admire. The results of this action have not yet appeared and it can only be hoped that they will not be what Germany so clearly desires.

Foreign propaganda during the war had, in fact, long been a great stand-by for all critics of the Government. Some part of the criticism simply reflected the political differences of outlook. Left-wing critics apparently think that all that is required to make the peoples of the Continent revolt and drive the Germans in dismay back to their own country is the proclamation that Britian wishes and firmly intends to instal everywhere that Socialism which her own peoples have never themselves accepted. As this section of the population with change in their blood is inevitably the most vocal, it was inevitable that this line of criticism should be heard most. But there were other lines of criticism also developed: the use made of propaganda in France, in the United States, the forms all propaganda should take; and so on. The Censorship was also a bone of contention that no-one tired of worrying. As a consequence the Ministry of Information was an uneasy throne to occupy; and for some time it was evident that a change of dynasty was about to take place.

On July the 20th the Prime Minister made the change. The young and thrusting Mr. Brendan Bracken was appointed Minister; and he at once began to make changes.

Whether the changes will be sufficient to meet the demands of the critics remains to be seen. At least Mr. Churchill had appointed one who had his confidence and one moreover who was young and sufficiently confident to brush aside any obstacles that prevented the effective functioning of the Ministry. He was given as parliamentary secretary Mr. Thurtle. In this the Prime Minister once again bowed to public clamour when it appeared to concern a matter that is really immaterial. For some reason the Labour Party wished to secure some control of the Ministry of Information, though they were well represented on the staff. Indeed at the first it had been taken that the staff should be divided among the three parties, and appointments on that basis inevitably included many that were undesirable. Now that it had settled down and was doing a certain amount of good work a close time for criticism might well have been of advantage.

Another appointment of some interest was that of Mr. Butler who, having borne the uneasy diadem of the Foreign Office through troubled days with ease and distinction, became President of the Board of Education. Mr. Duff Cooper became Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a position which many brilliant men had occupied on their way to extinction. He was to exercise in the Far East a somewhat similar role to that of Mr. Lyttelton in the Middle East. At least he must have rejoiced that he was leaving Bloomsbury for a more colourful sphere. Lord Hankey went to the Post Office, Mr. Richard Law became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, with the duty of trying to live up to Mr. Butler's success, and Mr. Duncan Sandys Financial Secretary of the War Office. Certainly Mr. Churchill did not lack courage.

So the Government had another shuffle and without mak-

ing too much change offered a little excitement to the professional critics. For the rest of the people the changes were accepted with indifference. Provided Mr. Churchill remained he could shuffle and cut as often as he pleased. As their pockets had been rifled and their clothes removed without a ruffling of their composure, they could stand almost everything; and the Prime Minister saw that they had not to bear too much.

CHAPTER 14

Germany Turns East

'How can we teach the German worker that Bolshevism is an infamous crime against humanity if we ally ourselves with this infernal abortion and recognize its existence as legitimate?' —*Mein Kampf*, Unexpergated Edition, p. *639*.

At three o'clock in the morning of Sunday, June the 22nd, the German Army launched an offensive against the Russian forces on the eastern frontiers of Germany, and a new phase of Hitler's bid for world power had begun.

The blow came as a surprise to Russia and, in spite of their desire to make it appear that they were merely anticipating an attack by 'immense Russian armies', the Germans announced, in the first official report on the fighting, that the Russians were caught in 'the act of deployment'. In a disingenuous document there was at least this one element of truth, and it is as remarkable that it should be as that it should be admitted.

A clash between Germany and Russia was so clearly foreshadowed in *Mein Kampf* that the conclusion of the Russo-German Pact on the 21st of August 1939, startled a world not unused to the jongleur of Berchtesgaden. Hitler's statements in *Mein Kampf* had apparently been the basis of

his deliberate policy for some years. The Germans had appeared in Spain as its exponents and the only solid support for the opposition to General Franco had come from Russia and Communist-inspired International Brigades. Germany had formed an alliance on the basis of the Anti-Comintern Pact, and between Germany and Italy this represented an ideological bond even if to Japan it offered only a chance to achieve with the blessing and possible assistance of two Great Powers what she had feared to attempt against universal disapproval.

Hitler's gift for invective only became lyrical when it dealt with Soviet Russia. 'It must never be forgotten,' he wrote, 'that the present rulers of Russia are blood-stained criminals, that here we have the dregs of humanity which, favoured by the circumstances of the tragic moment, overran a great State, degraded and extirpated millions of educated people out of sheer blood-lust and that now for nearly ten years they have ruled with such a savage tyranny as was never known before. It must not be forgotten that these rulers belong to a people in whom the most bestial cruelty is allied with a capacity for artful mendacity and believes itself to-day more than ever called to impose its sanguinary despotism on the rest of the world. . . . One does not form an alliance with a partner whose only aim is the destruction of his fellow-partner. Above all, one does not enter into alliances with people for whom no treaty is sacred; because they do not move about this earth as men of honour and sincerity but as representatives of lies and deception, thievery and plunder and robbery.*

Hitler can hardly be charged with reticence about his feelings; but there are other statements that give a more characteristic reason for the inevitability of a clash. 'Never

* *Mein Kampf*, edition quoted, p. 538.

permit', he said, 'two Continental Powers to rise in Europe. Should any attempt be made to organize a second military Power on the German frontier, by the creation of a State which may become a Military Power, with the prospects of an aggression against Germany in view, such an event confers on Germany not only the right but the duty to prevent by every means, including military means, the creation of such a State and to crush it if created.'*

The signature of the Russo-German Pact, therefore, did nothing to remove the impression that this was a *mariage de convenance* of unusually modern character, concluded to meet an immediate necessity and liable to abrupt termination once the need had passed. Hitler wished to open his campaign for world power with an attack upon Poland and he foresaw that then, or in the not distant future, he might be challenged by France and Britain, and an arrangement with the Power he had called 'a menace to peace', scarcely a year before, was the most convenient method of assuring a free hand in the east and ruling out interference when he turned west.

This appeared to be so obviously the argument that decided Hitler and his no more scrupulous adviser, Ribbentrop, that it caused little surprise to find *Das Reich* admitting the purpose when the need had passed. When Germany found it to her advantage to turn against Russia, this semi-official weekly frankly contended that the treaty had saved Europe since without it Germany would not have been victorious over Europe. It even went so far as to place the onus for the conclusion of the pact upon Britain and France, who had 'compelled' Germany to sign the treaty to secure peace in the east.

Hegemony in Europe was, however, a necessary step in

* *Mein Kampf*, edition quoted, p. 541.

the advance to world power. Russia had, therefore, to be brought into the 'new order', and Hitler judged this to be the more necessary because of the Soviet's determination to ignore national boundaries and take the world for their parish. The more immediate compulsions were patent for all to see. Russia had been allowed to resume control of the Baltic States, which Germany coveted, and to compel Finland, with whom she had a traditional friendship, to cede territory. As the war dragged on Germany gathered fresh needs to control Russia. The war had come to be one of internal combustion engines and petrol; and Russia was the only source of sufficient oil within easy reach, and she had mineral resources that her neighbour could only regard with envy. Furthermore, as the control of the British blockade was tightened by the Government and by the inevitable effect of every fresh German conquest, the historic clash of the Oceanic and Continental systems took shape and Hitler, early in 1941, began to realize the strength of its pressure. At some point in that spring full recognition came to him. The clash had gained a new orientation from the very conditions in which he trusted for success. The greatest manufacturing unit in the world was also the greatest producer of high-grade petrol, and the United States was at the service of the Oceanic and denied to the Continental Power.

If Hitler could have secured a swift and complete victory over Britain the war would have been over and his new-old slave order would have been launched with ease. As he could not see his way to any such decision without unlimited resources and the full use of them, he was compelled to recognize the probability of a long war. In his speech at Berlin on March the 16th, in commemoration of the war casualties, he had repeated his confident design to end the war during the year: 'Cool and determined we shall

"fall in" this year to complete what was begun last year. '. . .' Not two months later, on May the 4th, in a private address to Party Leaders, in the Berlin Chancellery, he showed that the prospect had gone. 'Our political friends', he said, 'must preach to our people that the war which I was anxious to end this year must go on.' In his public speech at the meeting of the Reichstag on the same day he only announced the unpalatable truth by implication when he promised Germany better weapons next year. The next day an official spokesman made the point clear beyond misunderstanding by informing his hearers that it really mattered very little when victory came while assuring them that it was as certain as ever.

Between the two speeches came the Balkan campaign, the attack upon Crete and General Rommel's advance to the threshold of Egypt. It seems quite possible that all three played their part in adding the final conviction that the war could not be won this year. General Rommel only succeeded in reaching the threshold of Egypt and there he was held, his armoured units immobilized or consuming precious supplies. The Balkan campaign, with the operations over Crete, expended more valuable stores of petrol and held the Germans in action, while the *coup d'état* in Iraq came to an inglorious end. It has been suggested that the German staff favoured a campaign in Iraq to secure the necessary supplies of petrol but it became a dangerous gamble when Rashid Ali fled to Iran.

Another reason may have been the growing determination of the United States to give Britain every assistance in their power in the conviction that a British victory is necessary for their safety. Hitler must also have thought that with Russia in his power, he could proclaim the 'new order' over the whole of Europe and leave upon Britain the onus

of challenging it. He must have been moved by the steady growth of British power and the conquest, then already almost complete, of Italian East Africa. Something compounded probably of all these brought the realization that, what every famous German General had warned his country against, had Hitler and his satellites in its toils. It is not so much the 'two-front war' as *the long war* that makes the nightmare of the German staff. German military theorists have always warned their countrymen against entering upon a long war, insisting that it must remain unproductive.

World Power or Downfall was no newly contrived German dilemma. Two generations of German soldiers had fed upon it; and they had given all their thought to its solution. It was not moral scruple but a business conviction that, while war is the historic means of expansion, nothing could be achieved by a long war. In challenging Britain, however, Hitler had marched into it and though realization came late, it came fully.

But once it was achieved, the inference to a megalomaniac like Hitler was obvious. He did not intend to fail as had Napoleon or, while taking the Napoleonic path, he was resolved to snatch victory from the very course that had brought his model defeat. He embarked on this course the more readily in the conviction that he was possessed of a technique and material equipment that would assure him success if undertaken at once while, if deferred, it might be too dangerous to risk.

So, through May and June, it seemed evident to most observers that Germany would coerce or attack Russia. There lay vast wheatlands, mineral deposits and oil supplies, and all the other commodities which a modern state engaged in a modern war requires; and even if Russia willed she apparently could not yield sufficient for Ger-

many's need; and Hitler had reason to doubt if she was thoroughly desirous of doing so. German organization had no doubt that it could extract enough to make the country self-sufficient for as long as necessary and provide the means of finally settling with Britain. Negotiation held no such promise. Stalin could hardly be expected to hand his country over to complete German exploitation; and nothing less would yield the glittering prize that Hitler coveted. He could place his troops in Iraq and Iran, if he decisively defeated Russia. He could hope that from the Caucasus he could so coerce Turkey that his demand to march through the country upon Syria to the Suez Canal would be granted. He could come within sight even of India and, incidentally, he could defy the blockade indefinitely.

The attempt to negotiate with Stalin was never made, and though it is certain that Russia had kept the letter and the spirit of the pact with Hitler with a perfect loyalty that was worthy of a better cause and was all too rare in Europe at the time, Germany determined to attack. Hitler had followed his usual practice of carefully articulating his strategy. He had cleared his southern flank by the Balkan campaign and his pact with Turkey. It was common knowledge during the second week in June that he had reinforced his armies on the Eastern front. For many months some eighty divisions had been there; but during the early days of June the number was doubled, the bulk of the armoured divisions and of the Luftwaffe were moved across. And so the stage was set.

The British Ambassador had brought these facts to the notice of the Russian Government, but had been snubbed for his pains. The Russian wireless even went so far as to denounce the warning as an attempt to embroil Russia with Germany. The wicked British capitalists were held to be at

their old game; and yet Rudolf Hess had brought the news of the impending attack to Britain under the impression that the British Government would take the chance of securing the 'reasonable' peace which Hitler offered, before Germany embarked on the campaign which would make her mistress of Europe. In these days it seemed to most people that Britain being the one outstanding enemy would be attacked when the Russian campaign was over. But there is reason to believe that Hitler's plan was subtler. With Russia under his heel he could challenge Britain to disturb his 'new order' and with a specious show of reason could face the United States with the pretence that he had no designs on Britain or America. It might be a gamble for him to attempt to beat down Britain but, he could say, it would be a greater for Britain, even with the help of the United States, to invade the Continent and defeat him.

His policy had other advantages. He could appeal to the world as its saviour from Bolshevism, and it is idle to maintain that this 'crusade' had no appeal to many people everywhere, especially in the United States. Mussolini had marched to power on the wave of revulsion from Soviet methods. Hungary had tasted their appeal and embraced the opportunity of fighting against Russia. Finland had suffered from them on two occasions and also joined Germany—though not too enthusiastically—in the Crusade. Rumania had been despoiled of a province by Russia (though Germany had presided over the surgical operation that also gave to Hungary one slice of her territory and to Bulgaria another) and sent her soldiers to assist. At the end of the first week in July Spain had a body of volunteers in Berlin as her contribution; and the Baltic States were not entirely cold to the inducement of delivering their territory once again from Russia.

But the universal popularity which Hitler thought the campaign would win never developed. He was moved by many of the motives and shared the illusions of Napoleon, to such an extent that some of the latter's statements though belonging to a historical context that was strangely different, might be used by Hitler to-day. Speaking of the outbreak of war with Russia Napoleon, on the 28th of April 1816, said:

'Je n'étais pas dans l'habitude de me laisser prévenir. Je pouvais marcher à la Russie à la tête de l'Europe. *L'entreprise était populaire*, la cause était européenne; c'etait le dernier effort qui restait à faire à la France; ses destinées, celles du *nouveau système européen* étaient au bout de la lutte. La Russie était la dernière ressource de l'Angleterre. La paix du globe était en Russie, et le succès ne devait point être douteux.'*

And on October the 25th of the same year:

'Au surplus, à la suite de beaucoup d'antécédents, *cette guerre eût dû être la plus populaire des temps modernes:* c'etait celle du bon sens et des vrais intérêts; celle du repos et de la sécurité de tous: elle était *purement pacifique et conservatrice, tout à fait européenne et continentale.* Son succès allait consacrer une balance, des combinaisons nouvelles, qui eussent fait disparaître les périls du temps pour les remplacer par un avenir tranquil; et l'ambition n'entrait pour rien dans mes vues.'†

Hitler was not alone in his illusions about the popularity of the campaign. There is reason to believe that, when the

* Comte de las Casas: *Le Memorial de Sainte-Hélène*, I. 510. Edn. in Bibliothèque la Pléiade; my italics.

† Ibid., II, p. 390.

blow fell, the Russian Government seriously thought, as presumably Hess had thought, that Britain would at once make peace with Germany and join the 'holy war'. It was for this reason, as much as any, that Mr. Churchill, with an instantaneous appreciation of the position and the needs of the hour, made his historic broadcast on the evening of the day which saw the opening of the campaign. This broadcast so thoroughly represented the attitude of the majority of his countrymen to the attack upon Russia that a quotation will serve as a valuable record.

'I have taken occasion to speak to you,' said Mr. Churchill, 'because we have reached one of the climacterics of the war. In the first of these intense turning points a year ago France fell prostrate under the German hammer and we had to face the storm alone. The second was when the Royal Air Force beat the Hun raiders out of the daylight air and thus warded off the Nazi invasion of our island while we were still ill-armed and ill-prepared. The third turning point was when the President and Congress of the United States passed the "Lease and Lend" Enactment, devoting nearly £2,000,000,000 of the wealth of the new world to help us defend our liberties and their own. These were the three climacterics. The fourth is now upon us. At four o'clock this morning Hitler attacked and invaded Russia. All his usual formalities of perfidy were observed with scrupulous technique.

'No-one has been a more consistent opponent of Communism than I have for the last twenty-five years. I will unsay not a word that I have spoken about it. But all this fades away before the spectacle which is now unfolding. The past, with its crimes, even follies, and its tragedies, flashes away.

'I see the Russian soldiers standing on the threshold of

their native land guarding the fields their fathers have tilled from time immemorial. I see them guarding their homes, where mothers and wives pray—ah, yes, for there are times when all pray—for the safety of their loved ones, for the return of their breadwinner, of their champion and their protector. I see the 10,000 villages of Russia where the means of existence was wrung so hardly from the soil, but where there are still primordial human joys, where maidens love and children play. I see advancing upon all these in hideous onslaught the Nazi war machine, with its clanking, heel-clicking, dandified Prussian officers, its crafty expert agents, fresh from the cowing and tying down of a dozen countries. I see also the deadly, drilled, docile, brutish masses of the Hun soldiery plodding on like a swarm of crawling locusts. . . .

'Now I have to declare the decision of H.M. Government, and I feel sure it is a decision in which the great Dominions will, in due course, concur. But we must speak out now at once, without a day's delay. I have to make the declaration. But can you doubt what our policy will be?

'We have but one aim and one single irrevocable purpose. We are resolved to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the Nazi regime. From this nothing will turn us, nothing. We will never parley, we will never negotiate with Hitler or any of his gang. We shall fight him by land, we shall fight him by sea, we shall fight him in the air until, with God's help, we have rid the earth of his shadow and liberated its peoples from his yoke. Any man or State who fights against Nazidom will have our aid. Any man or State who marches with Hitler is our foe. . . .

'It follows, therefore, that we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and to the Russian people.

'We shall appeal to all our friends and allies in every

part of the world to take the same course and pursue it, as we shall, faithfully and steadfastly to the end. We have offered to the Government of Soviet Russia any technical or economic assistance which is in our power and which is likely to be of service to it. We shall bomb Germany by day as well as by night in ever-increasing measure, casting upon them month by month a heavier discharge of bombs and making the German people taste and gulp each month a sharper dose of the miseries they have showered on mankind. . . .

'The Russian danger is therefore our danger, and the danger of the United States, just as the cause of any Russian fighting for his hearth and home is the cause of free men and free peoples in every quarter of the globe. Let us learn the lessons already taught by such cruel experience, let us redouble our exertions and strike with united strength while life and power remain.'

Mr. J. G. Winant, the American Ambassador, had only the day before reached England from the United States where he had been conferring with the President and the Secretary of State, and he at once saw Mr. Churchill in the country. Lord Halifax had a conversation with Mr. Sumner Welles, the Assistant Secretary of State, lasting for two hours. It was not long before the result of these conferences appeared. On the following day Mr. Sumner Welles stated that:

'While all forms of dictatorship are inimical to the American way of life, the immediate issue is to halt Hitlerism. This is the outstanding consideration in connection with the German attack on Russia. . . . In the opinion of this Government, consequently, any defence against Hitlerism, from whatever source these forces may spring, will hasten

the eventual downfall of the present German leaders, and will therefore redound to the benefit of our own defence and security.'

It is difficult to imagine how anyone could have doubted the official reaction in Britain or America; and, although there was more division of opinion in the United States, in Britain the people were even more solidly behind the Government than before. Even the small heterogeneous body which was either Communist or so extremely Left-wing that they opposed the British war effort soon came to heel and was, naturally, more warlike than those who had supported the war from the beginning.

CHAPTER 15

The Battle of the Russian Frontiers

So the battle was joined. The Germans did not enter upon it in the gay, light-hearted manner that many English people believed; Germany was better informed about the strength of the Russian Army than any other nation and had few illusions about the magnitude of the task before her. Hitler issued an Order of the Day which makes this clear. 'German soldiers,' it ran, 'you are engaged in a hard battle, heavy with responsibility; for the fate of Europe, the future of the German Reich and the existence of our nation now lie in your hands alone. May God help us all in this battle.' General Brauchitch's Order was couched in more heartening terms: 'Full of confidence in the Führer, we shall beat the old Bolshevist enemy of National-Socialist Germany and thereby secure final victory over Britain.' A significant inducement this—'victory over Britain'.

The resources of the combatants were not known with any exactitude. Soviet Russia had kept her secrets better than any other nation and, although those of Germany were better known, once the war began only conjecture, based upon doubtful evidence, could at any moment form an estimate of her mobilized strength in men and material. In his speech at the commemoration of the war dead on the 16th

of March 1941, Hitler boasted, 'We look back on a winter filled with work;' and the speed with which Germany recognized her defeat over Britain in the autumn and set about mobilizing the Continent to manufacture a fresh and more powerful armament was the most impressive action in her conduct of the war.

On the other hand, her human resources were not and could not be comparable with those of Russia. It is a rough but sufficiently reliable rule that a country can finally mobilize for military service about a tenth of the strength of her nationals. On this reckoning Germany could mobilize about eight million men all told while Russia could raise more than double that number. For the purposes of a campaign against Russia, however, Germany could count on the assistance of Rumanian, Finnish, Hungarian, Slovak, Italian and even Spanish troops. Apart from the Finns, however, none of these were of first-rate quality. The Hungarians who had the fibre lacked the training. The Rumanians were of fair quality and German officers had attempted to give them an intensive course. Everyone defeated the Italians; and *Das Reich* listed Italy as among the 'occupied territories'. The Spanish volunteers were of first-rate fighting quality but of poor training; and their numbers were too few to affect the issue.

By attacking without warning Germany secured one further advantage of considerable importance. The French mobilization was not complete before September the 21st and the immense distances and lack of appropriate communications made the process a lengthier operation in Russia. Mobilization occupied the better part of five weeks and even then was not complete in the sense of Western armies. Germany had quietly completed her concentration before Russia set about her mobilization, and this might

have been a decisive advantage against a less stubborn adversary and a more highly organized country; for the German Army was designed to deal with the conventional army of Western Europe.

The armies which actually clashed in the East were, therefore, gravely dissimilar. The Germans appear to have concentrated there about 160 divisions, including the bulk of their heavy armoured divisions and at least six light armoured units. The Rumanian and Finnish irredentist armies added about 26 divisions, and the Hungarian, Slovak, Italian and Spanish may have made up another 4. This would give a total of about 190 divisions. At this time Germany had some 250 divisions mobilized so that the concentration on the Russian front represented about two-thirds of her total force.

The Panzer division was well known already and mainly from the effect it produced; but its actual constitution deserves a word of explanation since its role cannot otherwise be fully appreciated. An ordinary infantry division is a complete army unit, provided with all arms and services so that it can subsist or fight as an independent formation. The Panzer division is a mobile unit, designed to rupture enemy positions and, for that purpose, provided with a number of tanks which are, in effect, mobile forts sufficiently armoured to protect the garrison against hostile fire and sufficiently armed to destroy or disable centres of defence. The core of the division is the tank brigade of two tank regiments, each consisting of two tank battalions of 100 tanks. But it also contains a motorized infantry brigade, a mechanized artillery regiment, heavy machine-gun, engineer and anti-tank battalions, a motorized reconnaissance unit, signals and other necessary services. It is not, therefore, merely a tank force, formidable as that might be; it is, in effect, a small

'shock' *army*, and its tendency to run down has been obviated, to some extent at least, by providing a number of the tanks with reservoirs of petrol.

The Russian Army most resembled the German, of all European armies. Before the Germans were allowed to have tanks, the Russians were studying their tactical use; and it is probable that their armoured forces are as large as the German, if not larger. In the air, again, it seems likely that the Luftwaffe was no more than numerically equal to the Russian Air Force. The question of quality must modify conclusions founded upon mere quantity; but this is a matter that tends to evade decision. The Russian tanks include a wider range of types. There are monsters which tend to dwarf the largest seen at the western front; and the medium types which I have had the opportunity of examining are quite as good as those used by the Germans. The Russian aeroplanes may not have the speed of the fastest used by Germany; but the pilots are admittedly bold and skilful, and it is impossible to forget that air supremacy in the Near East was secured by the old Gladiator.

It is, however, in the infantry that Russia excels. The reservoir upon which she can draw is over twice as large as that which supplies the German Army. If Russia could escape any decisive blow under the first shock of surprise she could place in the field more troops than the full mobilized force of Germany; and if she could hold out a few months she could look forward to concentrating overwhelming strength against her enemy. The German infantry do not consist of supermen. British and Imperial troops who have met them, on anything like equal terms, have been confident of their own superiority. At Dunkirk they demonstrated the fact and won the admiration of German generals. The Russian infantry have a different quality; but

they are soldiers of the race that has always known how to stand against the heaviest battering. They are not at all inferior, man to man. Armed on the same level as the Germans they could be trusted to hold their own; and they were known to be little, if at all, inferior in technical equipment. It was a British General who remarked that the former peasant had been turned into a competent technician, quite capable of using the modern arms with which he was provided and equally able to see to their maintenance.

At the opening of the attack, however, the Russians had only about three-quarters of the number of divisions massed against them on the German frontier; and some were only in the act of deployment. They had to maintain on the Far Eastern front about a quarter of their force and this, a considerable army, could not be withdrawn. It seems probable that the gross number of tanks employed on both sides was about the same, and the number of Russian aeroplanes was higher than that of the Luftwaffe. Where the German Army could claim to be superior was in its organization. It was trained to move with the precision of a limb, completely under central direction. The lower units were bred to responsibility and initiative. In every operation there was a constant stream of information from the circumference to the centre, and direction from the centre outwards, so that the opportunity opened by individual initiative might be seized and exploited to the full. It is doubtful if the material of which the Russian Army is made is entirely capable of that technical polish; and in the crisis of battle much might turn on such intelligent and flexible control.

The Russian Army was disposed in four groups. When the campaign began there was a continuous front with Germany, but not over the whole area open to attack. North of the Gulf of Finland there lay a long stretch of territory

covering the Murmansk railway and the White Sea canal. This frontier measured about 700 miles. At its southern end it covered the approach to Leningrad and its care was in the control of troops of the Leningrad military district who had made so ambiguous a showing in the Finnish campaign. There were some thirty-five divisions in that area. South of the Gulf of Finland lie the three Baltic States which had been taken over by Russia, and the frontier with Germany lay along the Lithuanian frontier, taking in a loop of former Polish territory and then turning almost at right angles to follow the eastern boundary of East Prussia to the Narev and so across Poland. The frontier made a sort of great Z to Brest Litovsk. This sector, north of the Pripet Marshes, was held by about forty divisions. To the Bessarabian front were allotted some forty-eight divisions, and to the sector in between, Volhynia and Galicia, twenty-five. It will be seen that practically half of the total forces lay south of the Pripet Marshes. The Finnish front had only five or six divisions fewer than were allotted to the area which looked towards Minsk or Moscow. One cannot but reflect that, if Russia had secured a wide glacis in front of her main defences, she had suffered a compensating loss in the inevitable tendency to weaken the force which held it.

The frontier had an incidental disadvantage. For an offensive strategy the northern part offered the chance of a converging attack upon East Prussia; but the defensive was hampered by the possibility of a divergent attack which, if successful, must disrupt the armies on the frontiers. The danger of such a development lay in the fact that on this sector the Russians were defending their most vital centre. The historic line of invasion is the main highway through Minsk to Smolensk and Moscow. When Napoleon invaded Russia this was his way of approach and, while his



6. The First Phase of the German Campaign.

main army moved on Vilna, Jerome marched on Grodno. Barclay de Tolly fell back on Drissa, on the Dvina, and Vitebsk, while Prince Bagration retreated to Mohilev. The two Russian armies converged upon Smolensk and the French followed them, and marched up the Moscow road. It could hardly be sheer coincidence, nor the suggestion of the season, that impelled Hitler to concentrate, like Napoleon, in mid-June and march on the 22nd as the earlier adventurer had done.

But it is of importance to note that to this vital area were allocated between eight and ten divisions fewer than to the Bessarabian front which was threatened by so large a proportion of non-German troops. There was another stretch of the front that was also of very different value in offence and defence. Below Sokal the front turned westward and formed a broad and deep pocket in the enemy territory. This Galician pocket was extended on the south to the Hungarian frontier and took in the Bukovina, whence it turned along the Pruth, to include Bessarabia.

From the White Sea to the Black Sea the frontiers must have measured about 1,800 miles; and such a length clearly precluded any organized line of defences. In fact, the Russians held every natural defensive position, such as river-lines, every fortress, such as Brest, as long as they could; but their main defensive was a deep fortified area on the old Russian frontier. The long battle-front also precluded any clear air supremacy. Local supremacy might be achieved for a time; but over a stretch of 1,800 miles there could not fail to be considerable areas dominated by Germans whole others were apparently controlled by the Russians. From the conformation of the frontiers the German problem was simpler than the Russian. It could not fail to be easier to rupture some part of the front than to

defend all. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to hold a front against the attack of armoured forces with a sufficient air force operating in close support. It is almost impossible to conceive an attack, delivered under conditions of complete surprise, which should not secure an initial success. Only when there is an extremely short front, organized in depth with the utmost elaboration, is it possible to imagine a complete deadlock and the development of siege conditions and, even then, if the assailant has complete air superiority an initial and total check is barely conceivable, since it is men who defend positions and not the positions which defend the men.

The German Order of Battle was elaborate and suggestive. Across the sector between the northern frontier of East Prussia and the Black Sea were disposed three army groups. The most northerly, under Fieldmarshal Ritter von Leeb, comprised two armies; one commanded by General von Küchler had the role of reducing the Baltic States; and the other, commanded by General Büsch, was to strike north-eastwards towards Ostrov and Porkov, and, with the Panzer group of General Hoeppner, up the eastern side of Lake Peipus to block the communications between the Russians fighting in the Baltic States and those of the Leningrad area. General Keller commanded the Luftwaffe units co-operating with these armies. The central army group was under the direction of Fieldmarshal von Bock, who had commanded the northern group in the Polish campaign and, on the Western front, an army on the Aisne. This group was directed towards the east and comprised the armies of Fieldmarshal von Klüge, General Strauss and General von Weicks with the Panzer formations of General Guderian and General Hoth, and the Luftwaffe forces of Fieldmarshal Kesselring. These two army groups were

directed on divergent lines, as the frontiers suggested, and aimed at the complete disruption of the Russian armies holding this sector of the front. That disruption accomplished, they were provided with the armoured formations to exploit the situation fully.

The third army group was under the command of Fieldmarshal von Rundstedt, who had commanded the larger army group in the Polish campaign and the group operating against the French and British armies in the West. In that campaign von Bock had been in charge of the single army on the Aisne sector, and it is at least suggestive that the German General who had been given the more important command in the two earlier campaigns should be placed on the southern and not the central sector of the Russian front. Under him were placed the armies of General Stuelpnagel and Fieldmarshal von Reichenau, with the Panzer units of General von Kleist, the German and Rumanian army of General Antonescu, and, later, the German and Rumanian divisions of General Ritter von Schobert. The Luftwaffe force of General Loeb was attached to this army group which operated south of the Pripet Marshes against the Russian groups in Volhynia-Galicia, and in Bessarabia.

General Folkenhorst, the commander of the forces in Norway, was given the direction of the German and Finnish troops operating between the Baltic and the White Sea, with Marshal Mannerheim commanding the German and Finnish divisions on the sector south and immediately north of Lake Ladoga, General Wallenius in charge of an army on the sector he had so successfully defended against the Russians, and General Dietl's German force on the Murmansk front.

The Battle Begins

The actual attack began at dawn on Sunday June the 22nd, by the Luftwaffe attempting to carry out the Douhet plan. Unfortunately for the success of this plan, it is now so well known that appropriate precautions are taken. Even in Belgium and later in Greece the aeroplanes had been moved over-night, and in countries which have given more thought to war the attacker is likely to leave with a more comfortable assurance of success than the facts warrant. The well-known aerodromes are dotted with the shapes of aeroplanes but it is improbable that many of them are actual aircraft; and Germany seems to have had this fictitious victory in the unannounced attack. This was, in any case, merely the overture. The main attacks were delivered at 3 a.m. towards the north, through Lithuania, south-eastward from Suwalki towards Grodno, and across the Narev towards Lomza; and towards Vladimir Volynsk, Stojanov and Rava Ruska, in Volhynia.

Each of these thrusts achieved some initial success. An armoured column crossed the frontier heading for Shavli (Siauliai) in Lithuania. Another passed through Kalvaria and advanced towards Vilna. A third penetration pointed towards Grodno. Nowhere was the success secured without adequate payment. Fierce counter-attacks drove back the infantry and the armoured unit directed upon Shavli was met by Russian tanks which annihilated one Panzer regiment. Yet at the end of the second day the fortress of Grodno had fallen and the Germans pushed on towards Wolkowysk. This advance was of the first importance since the town lies about 100 miles to the east of where the Russian forces were still stubbornly challenging the German advance, and one arm of the pincers movement which was to close down east of the Bialystok area was already getting into position. A Panzer unit was nearing Vilna,

there was fierce fighting about Shavli; and Kovno (Kaunas) was beset. The Russian Army holding the Lithuanian frontier had been cut in three directions and Panzer units were, at places, 60 to 100 miles from their starting point. Worse still, the southern arm of the pincers movement was pressing through the small fortress of Lomza towards Bialystok; and although the fortress of Brest Litovsk still held, an armoured detachment had penetrated to Kobrin nearly forty miles to the north-east.

In Volhynia the Germans attempting to reach the river Styr through Vladimir Volynsk were flung back by a heavy counter-attack. At Rava Ruska they drove a deep wedge into the Russian positions, but could not maintain their positions and were driven back across the frontier. But at Stojanov, which they captured on Sunday, they were only about twenty-five miles from the railway which was the main avenue of supply to the deep pocket about Przemysl, and they attempted to advance towards it through Brody. If they could cut the railway, the position of the Russians far to the west would have speedily become critical. But the Russian Command on this front had ample forces for the heterogeneous collection of troops sent against them; and the defence was stubborn and unyielding.

It was apparently on the third day of the offensive that the most significant successes were registered. Vilna was taken and with it the way was opened towards Dvinsk in the north and Baranovice in the south. Both of these towns are of cardinal importance. Dvinsk is an important crossing of the Dvina which opens up the way to Ostrov, Pskov and Leningrad. Baranovice is a very important junction on the main railway line from Warsaw through Brest to Smolensk. But the armoured unit which broke through to Vilna was able to pierce the local defence, and between that town and

Oszmiana, tanks were able to develop the advance to the east, towards Vitebsk, Borisov on the Berisina, and towards Orsha. On the same day Kovno fell, and other armoured units sped northward towards the river Dvina at Jacobstadt (Jakobpils). In neither case were the German infantry allowed to follow; and, out of the confused fighting, there began to develop the warfare of to-day. Behind the tank spearhead fierce battles took place between the opposing infantry. In the campaign on the Western front the tank penetration had appeared to convince the defence that all was over and it became the custom to surrender, almost without a struggle. The Poles had refused to admit the convention and fought stubbornly to the end. But it was a struggle without hope. On the Russian front it was taken as the only hope of success against the Panzer attack. It was, in fact, the tactics laid down in the German textbooks, and it had been studied and assimilated by the Russian Command. But it produced entirely novel situations. In a few days battles were taking place at places separated by 50 to 100 miles, with the Germans trying to carry out their traditional strategy of envelopment and at the same time maintain their advance. In such novel and confused conditions, it was impossible to say which were the enveloping troops and which the enveloped. The fighting escaped from the control of the command, who were unable to direct the operations or even say what was taking place at any given moment.

Another important success on this third day of the offensive was the fall of the fortress of Brest Litovsk. The Germans had brought up their heaviest siege artillery and reduced the main defences; but in the galleries deep below the ground the Russians continued to resist and did not give in until overwhelmed in hand to hand fighting or

killed. The capture of Brest Litovsk was no bloodless victory; but once the junction was made capable of use the drive up the railway and road to Baranovice was renewed with redoubled strength. A column moved up to the north-east to complete the envelopment of the Russian army in the Bialystok area. There, a situation resembling that to the west of Warsaw, in the Polish campaign, was reproduced and the Germans were apparently at a loss to know whether to attempt to destroy or capture it. In the event it was announced as both 'destroyed' and 'captured'; and it seems certain that, with the exception of a small proportion who cut their way out, the bulk of the troops suffered one or the other fate. But whichever it was, they did not perish without taking full toll of the Germans.

In the south the defence was much more successful. The attempts to cross the river Pruth into Bessarabia were ruthlessly checked and the Rumanian attack on Cernowitz in the Bukovina was broken up. The enemy succeeded in reaching the east bank of the Pruth at Skuleni but the bridgehead was wiped out by Russian cavalry, and the enemy were thrown back to the right bank of the river. At the end of the week the Russians felt so secure in this sector that, assisted by a river flotilla, they crossed the Danube by night, seized enemy positions and captured over 800 prisoners and numbers of guns. During the first week the position on the Bukovina and Bessarabian front was substantially unchanged and the Russians were completely masters of the situation. The Russian Air Force, indeed, began that series of attacks that touched the enemy on his most sensitive nerve. Ploesti, the centre of the Rumanian oilfield, was bombed and the oil refineries were left in flames. It is, of course, not easy to destroy an oilfield, and refineries can be moved out of danger; but the Russian attacks cannot fail to

have inflicted serious delay in securing oil at a time when vast quantities were being consumed.

On the Volhynian sector, to the north, there had begun that series of heavy tank attacks about Luck that seemed to continue interminably, day and night; and it was not until well into the second week that the town fell. Even then the active defence of the Russians prevented any rapid exploitation. Between these two southern sectors the pocket about Przemysl was being steadily evacuated under pressure. Przemysl had been captured; but a sharp counter-attack restored it to Russian hands. Attempts were made to cut off the pocket and surround the troops maintaining it; but apparently the heterogeneous mixture of troops—Hungarians, Slovaks and Germans—could make little headway, and the withdrawal from Przemysl and Lwow was carried out in good order to the great advantage of the Russian Command. The pocket had been a weakness in defence, though it offered chances to an offensive.

But on the sector north of the Pripet Marshes, the Germans had by this time secured a significant success. The 'Minsk sector' began to appear in the Russian communiques. Panzer units had succeeded in crossing the strip of Russian-occupied Poland and the Russian troops defending this area had to sustain a series of heavy attacks. It was here that, for the first time, there began to develop a massive tank battle. At no point in the long battle-line did the Russians resort to the passive defensive. Attack was succeeded by counter-attack, tank attack by counter-attack by tanks. The Russians as well as the Germans were equipped with anti-tank guns; and the destruction of tanks upon both sides was very heavy. But the tank battles in which German heavy tanks met heavier Russian types defy description; and even if some of the German tanks ultimately pene-

trated the Russian positions they bought their success at a great price. On the sixth day of the offensive, a heavy tank counter-attack in the Minsk sector broke through the German positions, overran the local headquarters, killed the General in command and seized his papers. But on the last day of the month, the ninth day of the offensive, the Germans reached the important city of Minsk and were there inside the 'Stalin Line'.

Minsk was the centre of one of the three military districts. It was there, at the military manœuvres of 1936, that Lieut.-General Martel saw tactical exercises carried out by over 1,200 tanks. At that time the tank was held in France to be of only minor importance and, if this was not the view of many British soldiers, it had certainly not come to its own. The encirclement of Minsk involved the abandonment of a headquarters in which the military organization had taken root for some time. It involved also the penetration of the 'Stalin Line'. There was, of course, no such thing as a continuous 'line' on the Russian front. The distances were prohibitive and Russian strategy was incompatible with the tactics it would have implied. There were belts of deep defensive and one of these lay about Minsk. The Russian plans for defence, however, while pivoting upon such positions where they existed, had already revealed themselves as more mobile, more apt to the new form of warfare; and, as a consequence, they made every river a possible line on which to check the assault, while depending upon fierce and prompt counter-attack for their real defence.

The encirclement of Minsk which took place on June the 30th represented the deepest German penetration. Minsk lies about 180 miles from the nearest point on the German frontier, and to reach it in nine days the Germans must have averaged some twenty miles per day. In France the

pace had not reached that figure; but General Cunningham's troops had more than doubled it in Abyssinia and not against an army in the early stages of mobilization and at first not fully deployed, but against a numerically superior force with superior armament. Nevertheless, it was a significant advance and it clearly threatened a vital centre. Minsk is on the historic avenue of approach to Smolensk and Moscow; and new vistas began to open. It cannot be said that this development was entirely unexpected, for most people in Western Europe, entirely ignorant of the strength of the Russian Army, sceptical of the strength of Soviet institutions and inevitably impressed by the German Army's run of success, were inclined to think that it was Hitler who was the 'man of steel' and not Stalin. To such people the Russian showing in battle was a continually repeated surprise. They were inclined to distrust the Russian communiqués. If they were not entirely dismissed it was for the sufficient reason that no-one could be persuaded to believe that Hitler could or would remain silent if indisputable victories could be announced. When Hitler did at length break silence, a week from the opening of the offensive, the deliberately contrived drama of the announcement served but to demonstrate its lack of substance. The broadcast was introduced with a fanfare of trumpets, interrupted to allow the vague but grandiose report to sink in, there were more fanfares and more instalments, until the story had run to its close with the announcement of the German people's gratitude to its brave army. One thing, however, this much trumpeted report established, though it was not designed, was the substantial accuracy of the Russian communiqués. They were vague; but they were lavish of detail as compared with the long German report. They were vague; but it was already evident that in such warfare the

Command could not know with any certainty where their units lay at any given moment and whether they were manœuvring freely or encircled.

But at the encirclement of Minsk the position showed German successes on other parts of the northern front. After the fierce battles in the neighbourhood of Shavli, Vilna and Baranovice, on the preceding Friday, the original fighting line was in fragments. Bodies of troops were fighting at various places separated by tens of miles. The Russians accordingly withdrew to new positions, fighting stubborn rearguard actions, and began to regroup their forces. The direction of the main thrust seemed now to be obvious, and it was necessary to concentrate troops to meet it. By this time, too, the River Dvina had been crossed and Dvinsk taken. At Jacobstadt another river crossing was seized and the Germans pressed northward across Latvia. The port of Libau (Liepaja) had fallen and an attempt was made to advance up the coast. Mechanized and motorized units attempted to break through to the Baltic. There had been no significant success on the Finnish front and Leningrad was only very remotely threatened.

The critical sector stretched from about Minsk to Baranovice where the Russians were trying to arrest the advance towards the east. But, as might have been foreseen, the Germans were developing a northward thrust as well as the more important movement in the direction of Moscow. The western stretch of the Dvina was stubbornly held. Indeed, this river which had been so stout a defensive barrier in the last war, had been expected to withstand attack as well once more. But Riga fell on July the 1st and as a line the river was no longer of much value. On the same day the Germans reached the Beresina at Bobruisk. They were to be long detained there; but that could not be known at the

moment. What was evident was the presence of the Germans at a river crossing nearly 140 miles east of Baranovice. The Beresina, a tributary of the Dnieper, had served the Russians well in Napoleon's ill-fated challenge of Russia and it was to play its part against the country's enemies again. It was at Borisov that the Emperor forced the crossing with heavy loss; and at the same crossing, though in the opposite direction, Hitler began to exert his pressure on July the 2nd. The attempts to cross with strong mobile forces were checked by the Russian infantry assisted by the artillery and Air Force. Numbers of German tanks were destroyed and the German infantry were decisively halted. For several days a heavy battle raged along the Beresina. The Russian tanks, artillery and aircraft inflicted heavy losses at Borisov and Bobruisk in battles that continued night and day as the first thrust of the German offensive ebbed to a standstill.

The attack was extended to the north in an attempt to ease the pressure. The Germans attacked violently at Lepel, about sixty miles to the north-east of Borisov and then at Polotsk, farther north still; but on July the 10th, when the impetus of the first thrust was clearly spent, Borisov was still held and the Germans that day suffered a heavy blow.

They had continued to push some detachments across the Beresina to the Drut where, below Bobruisk, it runs into the Dnieper at Rogachev; but that was the extent of their success in this phase. At Lepel and Polotsk they were held; but farther north they had exploited their success. On July the 5th an armoured unit made a heavy attack at Ostrov, on the Velikaya river. Most of the battles in this period raged about river crossings, and for several days a fierce struggle took place at Ostrov; but when the battle died down the town was still in Russian hands. In the neighbourhood of

Polotsk the Russians were still holding the Dvina but the Germans succeeded in crossing and established a bridgehead at Borkovichi. At Lepel a Panzer division was wiped out on Wednesday in a tank counter-attack supported by the artillery and air force. Farther to the north, the Finnish front had come to life. In the early days of July General Dietl attempted to seize Murmansk with a superior force. At one moment they appear to have entered the town; but they were quickly ejected and on July the 5th, after two weeks of fighting, the Russians were holding the line of the Litsa, thirty miles west of Murmansk. Further attempts to advance, two days later, in the north and about the northern shore of Lake Ladoga were decisively defeated and the enemy thrown back across the frontier.

Meanwhile the position had deteriorated in the south. Below the Pripet Marshes the Germans had made violent attempts to advance upon Kiev. The struggle raged most fiercely between Luck and Zloczow, some seventy miles to the south. At Dubno and Zloczow both sides lost heavily in massive tank battles. The struggle extended to the south at Tarnopol; but, in spite of heavy losses, the advance was checked. All these places are west of the old Russian frontiers; but out of the struggle there developed the protracted stand at Novograd Volinsk. This town, on the river Sluch, lies about twenty miles within the Russian borders, and the advance through Luck and Rovno came up against one of the most unyielding units in an army which was already a by-word for stubborn resistance. Day after day the attack was renewed; but the defence stood firm. The Germans had reached Shepetovka, about forty miles to the south-west; but, there, about the same distance within the Ukraine as Novograd Volinsk, they were held.

Farther to the south still, the enemy had at length begun

to advance. On July the 2nd a heavy attack was delivered on the line of the Pruth. The Russians, as we have already seen, had withdrawn on the immediate north and a withdrawal in this area was merely a sensible precaution. The enemy seized the opportunity to attack. They succeeded in crossing the Pruth; but the Russians, withdrawing to the Dniester, were not to be hustled and it was many days before the Germans even claimed to have reached that river. There was heavy fighting at Beltsi, in Bessarabia, on July the 8th; and a too impetuous attempt to hustle the Russians near Falciu led to the enemy being thrown back across the Pruth.

The force of the first thrust had now spent itself and a swift survey of the battle-front at this moment reveals the extent and limitations of the German success. It was on July the 10th that the Russians announced the dying down of the offensive. 'The Russian Army has now established a fairly stable line along the whole front of 1,500 miles.' The *fighting* had not died down; but the battle tended to oscillate within narrow limits in certain areas. At Ostrov the enemy was firmly held. Before Polotsk there was heavy fighting and the positions were only maintained by means of violent counter-attacks. Since the destruction of a Panzer unit, Lepel was firmly established. At Borisov, on the Beresina, the Germans were still attempting to secure the crossing; but on this day lost heavily in a crushing counter-attack. Novograd Volinsk, in the Ukraine, saw another large-scale advance checked; and in Bessarabia the endeavour to exploit the Russian withdrawal proved abortive. Hango, the isolated base in Finland, was closely beset, as it was to remain for many weeks. The armoured unit which had sped northwards across the Dvina had reached Dorpat (Tortu); but the resistance in Estonia was far from being

over. The Germans had claimed Orsha, on the railway and road between Minsk and Smolensk.

From Ostrov to the south the Germans had crossed the old Russian frontier and were, therefore, within the so-called 'Stalin Line'; but the depth of penetration was nowhere great except on the Smolensk sector. The initial thrust had broken the original front into a number of fragments and in most places had pressed on past them to a considerable distance, leaving them like isolated Russian islands in a sea of Germans. From this developed a wholly novel type of warfare. The occupied territories beyond Russia proper formed a sort of glacis defending the approach. The troops who held it were like the forward elements in a defensive zone. There could not therefore be a 'front' in the old-fashioned meaning; and it follows that there could not everywhere be communications which were immune from disturbance. While the detached elements held out the problem of supply admitted of no adequate solution. The implications of the situation were only recognized by the Germans after they had suffered by bitter experience.

There is a sense in which warfare ever seems to the civilian a sort of game, with elaborate rules and absurd penalties. A well-known writer, who after acting as Intelligence Officer produced a book on his experiences, noted that he found it hard to 'take war seriously'. There is a real substratum of truth in these observations; and the onlooker was presented by the Germans with the ironical situation that, failing to understand the implications of their own tactics, they were complaining about the 'unfairness' and 'oddity' of the Russian methods of fighting. They had come to take it as a convention, which every civilized soldier must accept, that once the armoured units passed him

he was 'out' and should surrender. The Russians had no intention of admitting any such convention. They intended to fight; and, as a consequence, the warfare came to resemble a clash at sea with self-contained battles going on at immense distances, with great towns holding out like a blockaded base, hundreds of miles from any prospect of immediate relief. The strangeness of the situation cannot be better suggested than by the fact that in the seventh week of the offensive, when the two armies were fighting an immense battle east of Smolensk, the city of Minsk, over two hundred miles to the west, was still in Russian hands and still in communication with the Russian headquarters.

The advantage of this stand and the numerous 'islands' of resistance dotted over the vast expanse of the battlefield was that it prohibited the use of main railways, interrupted others, and checked the channels of supply to the troops at the front. It must be recognized that the Russians were the first to react fully to the new lines into which the struggle had fallen. By the corresponding day in the campaign in the West, the Belgian Army had surrendered and the Allies were evacuating the troops. The Russians had not yet completed their mobilization and, by their magnificent stand against the attack which had everywhere before secured a decision, they had won time to bring their full force to bear.

CHAPTER 16

The R.A.F. Hits Back

The German air attacks upon Britain during the spring developed a weight and malignity that baffles description. Some attempt has been made to describe the effect of this mainly indiscriminate attack which two responsible German writers later on stated had been undertaken with the 'object and with the successful result, of so weakening England that she would never again be capable of large-scale action against Europe'. This is a very suggestive statement and it at least indicates the value attached to a consistent air offensive. Perhaps if the Germans had attacked with a greater attention to the war potential of Britain they might have had more effect. But read alongside the statements of Mr. Churchill, on June the 14th, that Britain for a month past had intensified her 'systematic, scientific and methodical bombing on a large scale of the German cities . . .' and 'we believe it to be in our power to keep this process going on a steadily rising tide, month after month, year after year . . .' the German assertion is suggestive testimony to the possible results of the British counter-offensive. One other quotation from the German Press emphasizes the same point though from a different angle. In the second week of June the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* stated bluntly that the 'fate of the Ruhr is the fate

of Germany'. In a war which had become increasingly a struggle of supply this might almost be taken as a truism; but it needs to be borne in mind in estimating the meaning of the British air offensive against Germany. When it is remembered that between June the 16th and July the 10th over 2,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the Ruhr, in addition to 1,000 tons on Cologne and 500 tons on Bremen, some idea of the direction and impact of the R.A.F. offensive can be gathered.

This long, concentrated, versatile and destructive attack was very largely simultaneous with the Luftwaffe raids upon England; but as it was part of the main strategy of Britain it differed in character from the German attack which assumed a strategic purpose only in default of a land attack. British strategy had to centre in the operation of Sea Power assisted and pressed home by the effect of the Royal Air Force offensive. The land attack, from the pronounced numerical inferiority of her armies, had to be regarded as subsidiary, though it was part of the strategic scheme to administer the *coup de grâce* by a heavy sustained and scientific land attack. This to many of those who best knew the might of the German Army may have sounded almost fanciful until the Russian Army entered the field to inflict such terrific casualties upon the flower of the German Army that the prospect began to assume a more credible appearance.

The Royal Air Force struck with a careful precision against military targets in Germany and occupied Europe. It can readily be admitted that the bombs did not always find their targets, but it is certain that the utmost pains were taken that they should. It may further be stated that although for much of this period the German centres had a greater number of anti-aircraft guns than Britain could

command, the targets were very rarely missed on that account. The German anti-aircraft guns were less scientifically controlled than those in Britain and depended more upon mass fire than selective fire; and it is but another matter for just pride in the British airmen that they were put off so little by danger and so much more by the difficulty of finding their chosen target.

In June began a period of raiding so intensive that it almost baffled, as it had before failed to enter, the imagination. For some little time the raiding continued almost without cessation throughout the twenty-four hours. This was not as was suggested at the time merely the attempt to assist our new ally, though there is certain evidence that it achieved that object. It began about the middle of June while Russia was still the official friend of Germany; and it was launched then because the very comprehensive reconnaissance service of the R.A.F. had shown that Luftwaffe squadrons were being withdrawn from Western Europe at the very time when the R.A.F. was beginning to expand with a growing acceleration. Ventures which had before been impracticable began to be feasible and the great sweeps over occupied territory in daylight began to supplement those night raids which were being developed with increasing weight and intensity. But these were not the earliest daylight raids. The Royal Air Force ranged over the occupied territory and the North Sea area even in February and northern France and southern Belgium became gradually accustomed to the great sweeps of bombers with their escort of fighters acting in support. It need scarcely be said that they did considerable damage. Shipping was never safe in the North Sea; and, through the damage to internal communications, it had to be used more and more. But the raids went inland in full daylight and

such objectives as the Channel ports, factories in northern France and southern Belgium, the Ijmuiden iron works and the barges and quay-side factories; Walcheren with its important junction; the Danish railways and wireless stations, the ships in Rotterdam harbour began to feel the weight of their attack. On May the 13th a more ambitious raid was made by British bombers. In an attack which took the defences completely by surprise the raiders were able to bomb the heavily fortified base of Heligoland. They even made a low-level machine-gun attack upon barracks and gun positions and were able to return without damage. On June the 2nd they made an even more daring raid and bombed the shipping in the Kiel Canal, and land objectives in Schleswig Holstein, and sank a supply ship off the coast of Norway. Occupied France and Wilhelmshaven were similarly attacked in daylight during the early days of June.

But the range and versatility of this attack were amazing. It covered not only northern Europe and particularly Germany but embraced Italy also. Genoa and Petsamo, Kirknes and Calabria equally figured as targets for the raiders; and in the last-mentioned place the most novel of all the raids took place. British parachutists operated in force for the first time and did considerable damage to important nodal points; but apparently none of them returned and this daring and productive raid proved costly. It was not, however, the daylight raids of the early spring that did the damage to Germany and caused German spokesmen to appeal to the people for courage. It was the continuance and extension of the night raiding which, begun before Germany, had from the first been more carefully concentrated on purely military objectives. The raids were being carried out now by increasing numbers, by bombers of in-

creasing capacity and with bombs of considerably increased destructive force.

The German ports, shipbuilding yards, industrial plant and communications came in for the most frequent visits; and, if we recall the impressions of the time, we must have thought that each succeeding attack was the heaviest of the war. The Prime Minister had pointed out that for a long time the Germans were able to discharge loads of explosives upon Britain far beyond what we were able to drop on Germany; but when he made this statement it was with the assurance that the balance was slowly turning to our advantage. This was being contrived in two ways. Great bombers were being ferried across the Atlantic in increasing numbers and the speed achieved in this way was a considerable addition to the reinforcement. These huge bombers, flying fortresses and other types, had a vastly greater carrying power with an extended range. But the other direction in which the capacity for destruction was being increased was the use of more potent explosives. It is far from impossible that the end has been reached in this development.

A group of raids of which the result was obvious to the world, and was indeed more remarked abroad than in England, had German warships for its main objective. *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, which were to have formed the nucleus of the German surface raiders after the scuttling of the *Graf von Spee*, lay in the harbour of Brest, an irresistible target for the Royal Air Force. The effect of these raids was notorious throughout the continent, though British people inferred from the repetition that little damage had been done. It was because they were damaged and immobilized in port that *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* were sent out to take up the role they were unable to carry out. It was the intention of the Royal Air Force either to destroy these

warships or to keep them immobilized; but the modern warship is hard to sink from the air. It is specially armoured to withstand attack; and, in spite of the damage done in a number of raids, *Scharnhorst* was located on July the 22nd in the harbour of La Pallice. In Brest a carefully made up understudy had been at first mistaken for the battleship; but the keen eyes of the airmen soon saw through the deception and then cast about until they found where the real *Scharnhorst* lay and then bombed her. *Scharnhorst* had seized the chance of the bad weather to creep down the 240 miles to La Pallice. Very heavy armour-piercing bombs were used and direct hits were obtained. The attack was followed up by a heavy night raid; and the raids were repeated the next day. The dockyard where *Prinz Eugen* was berthed was also damaged. The flying fortresses acted from a greater height than had ever been used before in actual raiding. This attack developed into a battle and the losses were heavy on both sides; but, against the British fifteen bombers and seven fighters, are to be set not only the further damage to *Gneisenau* and the damage to *Scharnhorst* and *Prinz Eugen* but also thirty Messerschmidts certainly destroyed and others probably injured. *Scharnhorst* was soon back in Brest.

These raids were an incidental part of the Air Force offensive, and destruction of the invasion craft was also a part of its duties; but both were defensive in character. The offensive itself on the Ruhr district was sustained and damaging. Cologne was raided on many occasions. The Ruhr, Rhineland and ports of north-west Germany were raided in May for twenty consecutive nights; Kiel suffered repeatedly; Düsseldorf had to bear the attacks of concentrated raids night after night; Hanover felt some of the heaviest raids ever delivered on any town; Hamburg was never left

for long by the airmen; Mannheim was attacked time after time; and of course Berlin had its share of attention. It is difficult indeed to estimate the weight of this prolonged and persistent attack. The mere number of the raids is amazing; and, as the newer types of bomber came into use—the Boeings or Flying Fortresses, the Stirling, Hampden, Halifax, Whitley and Wellington—the damage was more destructive and lasting. The new bombs were not only more destructive but had also a greater effect upon *morale*.

Many people became more and more sceptical about the net effect of this and other types of attack precisely, though irrationally, because the German accounts grew more and more imaginative. It was argued that as we knew that the German reports, even the official reports, were lying, the British claims must, therefore, be untrustworthy. This was undoubtedly the effect which the Germans wished to produce. They knew that, at long last, territorial claims would have their effect. Germany was actually occupying countries and no-one could possibly deny it. Indeed it was part of the British case that Germany was so shamefully ill-treating the peoples of these countries. The questions of casualties and of industrial losses could not be subject to accurate verification; and one claim seemed very much like another. Even the appeals of German officials for courage and steadfastness could be whittled down.

Yet it is impossible to doubt that the British air offensive did work a growing amount of damage upon German centres. The British evidence must be taken by itself. The British airmen's claims to have hit certain targets were carefully sifted. No-one in London, Coventry, Portsmouth, Plymouth, and a number of other centres could doubt that damage can be done by aircraft; and carefully selective bombing must, therefore, damage the chosen targets. When

in June the day and night offensive began there was evidence of the most reliable sort that it was damaging. It began early in June; but, when the Russian campaign opened and it was known that the greater part of the Luftwaffe strength had been taken to the east, it was developed very considerably. At first the day raids had things all their own way. The British pilots inferred that the German fighters left in the west were young and inexperienced; but it was not long before they were met by more numerous and more skilful opponents and had to fight for their lives.

This part of the offensive was far from being mere show. It was aimed always at definite objectives; but it was undertaken on the same conditions as the great German attack on Britain scarcely a year before. The Royal Air Force challenged the Luftwaffe over territory that was in German occupation and had been developed to suit their purposes. Their aerodromes were at hand and they had every chance which the Royal Air Force had enjoyed the year before. But the results were very different. During the seventeen days after the beginning of the German offensive against Russia no fewer than 128 raids were carried out on 50 targets. That must have been a record; and the amount of damage done in so large a number of heavy raids could not fail to be significant. The results of the clashes were very remarkable. Outside Europe the Royal Air Force, though it had never had the use of the same quality of aircraft, had always been victorious. Even in Malta, which was on the very doorstep of the Axis territory, the incredible happened and the Royal Air Force did much more damage than it suffered. It is not, therefore, very remarkable that of aircraft described as bombers, in the week after the opening of the attack upon Russia, the Axis lost 9 as against 1 lost by the R.A.F. Of fighters the Axis lost 32 while the R.A.F. lost none; and in

aircraft not listed under these categories the losses were 32 and 11 respectively. The total of extra-European losses was 73 as against 12 of the Royal Air Force.

It was in Europe that the battle should most have favoured the Luftwaffe; and there the casualties were very instructive. Of bombers the Axis lost only 10 as against 24 of the R.A.F.; but of fighters they lost 96 for 26 of the R.A.F.; and of aircraft not described under either category the Axis lost 4 to 3 of the R.A.F. The totals were 110 to 53. When the conditions are considered this must be reckoned a very remarkable result. At the very least, the commanders of the Luftwaffe must have left in occupied territory a sufficient number of sufficiently skilful pilots to meet the Royal Air Force attack. Daylight raids had been taking place since February. Extensive daylight raids had been carried out since the beginning of April. Marshal Göring could be in no doubt about what was likely to face the Luftwaffe in occupied Europe. Apparently he and his advisers made a mistake; and later on there is evidence that a considerable force of the Luftwaffe was brought back from the Russian front. This, of course, was one of the main objects of the developed attack which began in June. Yet in September Sir Archibald Sinclair was able to report that in the British air offensive since February the Royal Air Force had lost only 352 fighters and had shot down 537 enemy aeroplanes. If these results are compared with those of the Battle of Britain there is every ground for encouragement.

But the detached observer may be forgiven for harbouring some doubts about the strategical effect of the aeroplane. It will be remembered that Douhet demanded for his effects complete surprise. He dismissed the anti-aircraft defence and was undoubtedly wrong, but postulated what is in effect a completely unchallengeable air force. This con-

dition has never been given during the war. Even at Dunkirk it was seen that, with a tremendous numerical superiority, the Luftwaffe could not sweep the Royal Air Force from the skies, nor wreak a full vengeance upon the defenceless men on the beaches. Many complaints were made by the soldiers who were brought away from Dunkirk about the lack of Royal Air Force support; but it is the fact that in spite of the remarkable numerical superority of the Luftwaffe these men escaped. The effect of unchallengeable support over Dunkirk could, of course, be given by a very small number of German airmen, if in fact they were unmolested. But the aerobatics which they were said to have indulged in over the beaches seem to have meant very little; and I imagine that Göring would have preferred bombing.

The deduction from this incident and from the events of the British air offensive appears to be that to be decisively effective the attack must be delivered by overwhelming strength. An air superiority of one is meaningless; and no superiority that is not overwhelming can produce mass results. The bombing from levels such as that from which the Boeing works may be the real solution to all the difficulties of the present phase. There can be no doubt that the anti-aircraft defence can be developed very remarkably. Add to this the influence of the night fighter, which is certain to grow, and the field for destruction by bombing raids tends to narrow. But to conclude that it has no effect when carried out by comparatively small numbers of aircraft, carrying comparatively small loads, is to fly in the face of facts. That the British air offensive did not do more damage is due to the comparative smallness of the load of bombs carried during the greater part of the time. The Prime Minister drew attention to the nature of the problem; but

most people prefer broad statements, and on the results which a concentrated air attack may achieve reliable generalizations have to run the gauntlet of the enemy boasts of the smallness of the damage already done and sceptical inferences as to the degree of possible development.

The Germans and the neutrals know what damage has been done; and there can be no doubt that it has been very considerable. The exact amount will not be accurately known until it is no longer of any value. No strategic effect can be produced with merely a handful of aeroplanes; but the outlook might still be revolutionized by an overwhelming concentration of heavy bombers. Most people in England tend to think that the Royal Air Force has been operating with an abundance of every type of aeroplane, and maintain it all the more strongly because of its being in flagrant contradiction to all the known facts. They are responsible for the facts, they wish the conclusions. The wishes prevail.

CHAPTER 17

The Advance to Smolensk

The second phase of the German campaign against Russia showed Germany beginning to misunderstand and Russia to understand it. There can be little doubt that, although the Russians gave battle against the Germans with reluctance, the Russian army had been trained for offensive operations and the rulers of Russia had lavished so much care upon it that they thought they could meet the enemy on reasonably even terms. At the end of the first phase it was recognized that the German Army was a very formidable creation and that if Russia was to stand any chance of escaping defeat she would have to fight with might and main. This conviction was reflected in the changes in the central organization. On July the 11th it was announced that the front was to be divided into three sectors, the north-west being under the supreme command of Marshal Voroshilov, the western under Marshal Timoshenko and the south-western under Marshal Budyonny. There were obvious advantages in placing the best-known commanders in charge of the three sectors of the front; but there was no sign of the single unified direction that experience has proved the main, if not the essential, ingredient of victory. Marshal Timoshenko was only forty-six years of age and he was given charge of the main front. But, until

this time, he had been Commissar of Defence and one might have expected him to exercise the chief command. M. Stalin may have thought it well, as Commissar for Defence, to assume final responsibility for the direction of the military operations; but Hitler showed a sounder instinct in appointing a definite Commander-in-Chief. Marshal Timoshenko became a Vice-Commissar for Defence, and later in the month, four others were appointed with him. General Fedorenko took charge of tanks, General Zhigareff of the Air Force, General Zhruleff of supplies, and M. Shadenko of the political side of the army. He had vacated this position when political commissars were abolished; but in view of the definite use made by Hitler of political warfare and the danger of 'Fifth Columnists' he once more resumed control. Marshal Voroshilov was perhaps the best known of the three Commanders. He had been Commissar for Defence until the preceding year. He was sixty years of age, two years older than the most picturesque of the three Commanders. Marshal Budyonny was a Cossack and it was he who took charge of the operations against Finland when they had shown Russia everywhere defeated.

One other development took place, almost immediately after the appointment of the three Marshals. On July the 18th Russia signed an agreement with Great Britain by which it was declared that (1) the two Governments mutually undertake to render each other assistance and support of all kinds in the present war waged against Hitlerite Germany, and (2) that during the war they will neither negotiate nor conclude an armistice or treaty of peace except by mutual agreement. It was agreed that the treaty entered into force at once and was not subject to ratification. Russia was clearly settling down to a long and difficult struggle.

Germany, on the other hand, had obviously embarked on the campaign seriously; but now she appeared to think all was over except the occupation of Russia. There was scarcely an extravagance of which she was not guilty within the first few days of the resumption of the offensive. In a special announcement on the night of Saturday, July the 12th, it was stated that (1) the Stalin Line has been breached at all decisive points, (2) the Russians have been thrown across the Dnieper on a wide front, (3) the German troops are immediately before Kiev, (4) east of Lake Peipus the German tank divisions are advancing on Leningrad, and (5) signs of disintegration are evident in many Russian units. The German News Agency, on the following night, paraphrased this official report by stating that (1) Leningrad is immediately threatened, (2) the occupation of Kiev is imminent, (3) the route to Moscow is open and there are no further natural or artificial barriers. It is very doubtful if ever in history a mouse brought forth such a mountain.

At the beginning of this phase the Germans were just within the line of the old Russian frontier, north of the Pripet Marshes, as far as Borisov, along the Beresina to Bobruisk. At this point the penetration was deepest; at Bobruisk just over 100 miles. But neither Latvia nor Estonia was cleared up and the forces in both were to play a significant part in the development of the campaign. South of the Pripet Marshes, the penetration was least. The Germans had been held a week before the town of Novgorod-Volinsk; and nowhere were they thirty miles within the frontiers of the Ukraine. Fighting was still continuing in Bessarabia and even the Bukovina and Eastern Galicia were not clear of the Russians.

The Pripet Marshes made a natural division between Budyonny's and Timoshenko's commands, though there

was none between the western and north-western. The junctions of armies are always favourite points of attack because the armies are normally supplied by different lines of communication and in case of retreat tend to move on divergent lines. What should be merely an administrative division is inclined, under pressure, to become an actual division, a breach. The Pripet Marshes were a weakness in the Russian position as they were fighting a defensive battle. It is to be noted that it was on the flanks of the armies that the dangerous thrusts appeared and it is for this reason that a Commander-in-Chief with a profound military insight might have saved Russia many troubles.

It seems probable that in the first phase of the campaign the German Command set themselves to break up the Russian armies and throw them back upon the 'Stalin Line'. Along the old Russian frontier, as we have seen, there were deep defensive belts built upon the natural features of the country. They were strong if not continuous; and it must be assumed that the German Command thought that if these were pierced the sectors they guarded would lie open. This is the only reasonable explanation of the special German announcement on the night of July the 12th; but everyone can now appreciate the true value of the claims that were then made. Everyone knows in what sense the Germans were 'immediately before Kiev', how far the advance upon Leningrad carried them, how much the Russian armies had disintegrated. The claims of the German News Agency that Leningrad was immediately threatened, that the occupation of Kiev was imminent and the route to Moscow open are seen to be sheer moonshine. It is rare that official or semi-official claims are subject to so clear a test. Time has shown their worth; but when they were made no-one could say categorically that they were untrue. Claims about the

number of casualties cannot, even now, be denied convincingly. The Russians command such vast human resources that they might lose millions of men and still interpose a firm resistance. All that can be done with regard to such claims is to note their inconsistency and contradictory character; and there were abundant signs of both in the present phase of the campaign. Thus, on July the 17th the German communiqué said that the Russians were 'throwing in their last reserves'. On the 23rd it was stated in Berlin that the Russians were throwing in 'enormous reserves'. On July the 13th the Russians were 'thrown across the Dniester on a wide front'. On the 19th the claim was made that a passage over the Dniester had been forced at many points. On July the 13th it was officially stated that there were signs of numerous Russian units breaking up; on the 22nd the German communiqué said that signs of a unified control of the Russian armies could no longer be discovered. The impression left by these two statements is now known to be absurdly wide of the mark. But the most staggering of all the amazing inconsistencies concerns the casualties. On August the 6th the military spokesman in Berlin stated that the Red Army had lost in killed, wounded and captured about 4,000,000 men and, of these, there were about 3,000,000 killed. This spokesman came from the same race as the man who urged 'pecca fortiter'; and, apparently this was an exhortation he enthusiastically followed, for he went on to conclude that his figures meant that the Russian field army had been destroyed to a great extent. No wonder the routes to Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev were wide open; but, according to German official claims, they had been like that for over three weeks! It was on this same night that from the Führer's headquarters there was issued a special account of the campaign, interrupted by fanfares every now

and then. In this account, which naturally did not err by superlative modesty, it was claimed that the Germans had captured 895,000 Russians and that the number of killed and wounded 'far exceeded' this number. But, apart from the fact that the number of prisoners probably included the wounded, the number of killed and wounded could 'far' have exceeded it without bringing the total of casualties to more than half that announced by the 'military spokesman'.

Clearly Germany had started soberly and become so intoxicated by her success that she could no longer measure her achievement. Yet she had achieved definite successes, even if they were not of the order claimed; and, apparently, the High Command must have gathered as wrong a notion of the meaning of defences as had France to her own destruction. The idea was that once the Stalin Line was pierced at certain vital spots the heart of Russia would then lie open and ready for occupation. How misleading this conclusion was is now known to the world. But it was far from easy at the time to discover what was the meaning of the German claims; and even now it is not evident what justification Hitler had for the grandiose claims and the fanfare accompaniment. 'Bread and circuses' is a very old prescription for popular government; and it is easy to see the mind of the charlatan at work, perhaps too easy. It has also been suggested that Hitler was attempting to provide a sedative for the very real doubts and discontent that were stirring among the German people.

The three objectives of the second phase of the German offensive were Leningrad, Smolensk and Kiev. It was a misinterpretation of the approach to these objectives that led to the absurdities of the High Command statements. But progress was made in all three directions. The impetus of the

first offensive had died down by about July the 10th. It was clear that the last few days had seen merely the sort of actions that distract attention from the preparations for a new assault; and the first shots of the second offensive were covered by an ambitious attempt to land troops from the sea behind the Russian lines in the Baltic and an attack across the Karelian peninsula. This land movement began on the afternoon of July the 11th and it was under way for a whole day before the sea expedition was caught as it was entering the Gulf of Riga. The German convoy appears to have consisted of about fifty vessels, and it was attacked as it approached Ventspils (Windau) by shore batteries and by the Red Fleet and Air Force, with the result that thirteen of the transports and two destroyers were sunk and the convoy dispersed. This was a useful little action but it covered a much more dangerous thrust towards Leningrad. The Russian position south of Lake Peipus was very strong and, with the lake and the army in Estonia, it blocked the way to the old capital. This was one of the three 'decisive' points at which the Stalin Line was attacked most forcibly and an advance made across the defences. General Busch with General Hoeppner's armoured column attacked below the lake and were immediately involved in very heavy fighting. The Germans succeeded in breaking a way through to Pskov from Ostrov and from that point made a heavy thrust at Porkov, nearly fifty miles to the east. This town lies only about eighteen miles from the main lateral communications between Leningrad and the south; and round these two places the battle raged for many days. It is clear that this attempt to advance east of Lake Peipus was a dangerous threat to Leningrad. The attack upon Pskov was very heavy; and at first the armoured advance was held and in part repulsed. Some of the motorized units were surrounded

in small groups and either destroyed, section by section, or captured; and it was only after a week's fierce battle that the Germans were able to advance. But even then their way was not unmolested. The Germans claimed that they advanced 'practically up to Narva', on the line that links Tallinn and Leningrad, and closed the gap between Lake Peipus and the Baltic. It is interesting to read this account, issued, be it remembered, on August the 6th, since the use of the word 'practically' robs the claim of all meaning. It seems quite possible that a small detachment of tanks made its way to within sight of Narva; but it is very difficult to believe that it remained there. It was some weeks before there was any sign of life in that direction; and, moreover, without the control of the town it would be impossible to close the 'land-bridge' between the lake and the Gulf. If this was the decisive breach upon which the imminent fall of Leningrad was supposed to follow, it was rather a big word for a small achievement.

The other direction in which this 'breach' was exploited, Porkov, looked at the time almost as threatening. Fighting continued there until the end of the month, and for many days afterwards. A small detachment contrived to thrust towards the south-east from Ostrov to Novorzhev, about forty-five miles away, and the Germans had therefore pushed their front towards the east; but it had still not reached the lateral railway line and, of course, this was not in the direction of Leningrad. All that could be said of it was that the position south of the lake and within the defensive line had been broadened and deepened. The Germans claimed in nearly seven weeks' fighting to have taken on this sector over 35,000 prisoners, 355 tanks and 655 guns and to have destroyed 771 aircraft in the air and on the ground. Allowing for the inevitable exaggeration, these

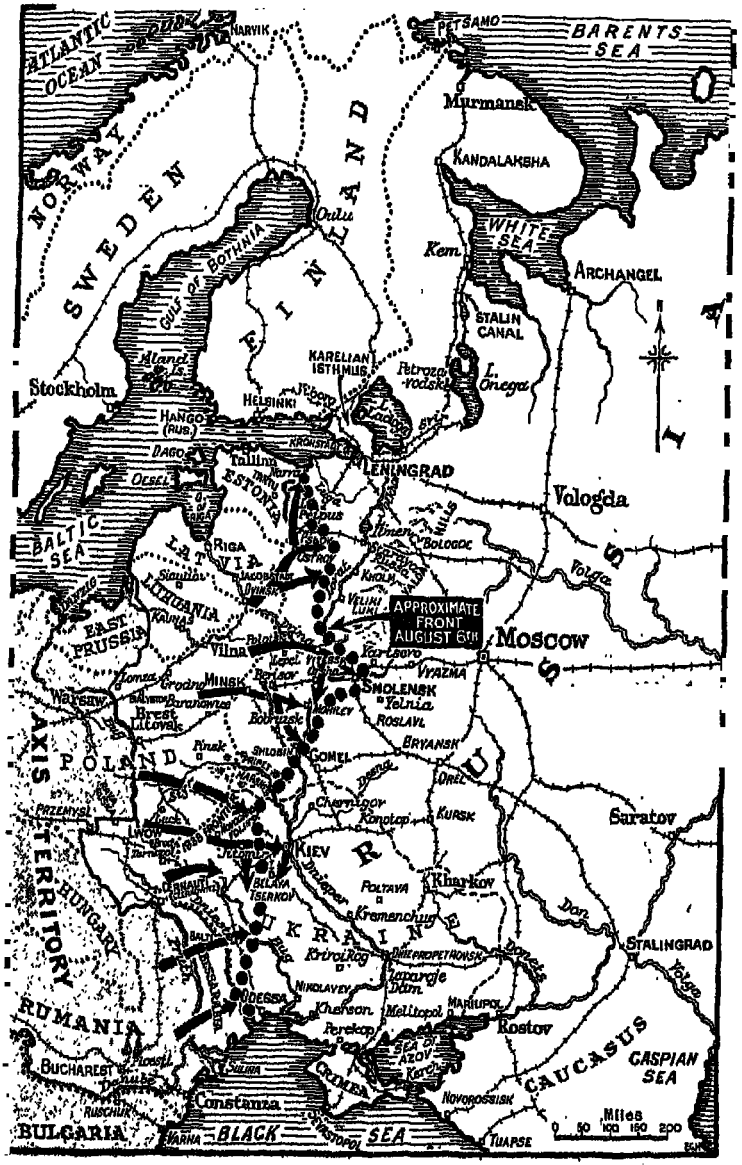
are not over-impressive figures for bitter fighting on a critical sector.

But it is obvious that upon these achievements the grandiose claim to have brought the fall of Leningrad appreciably nearer could not be sustained. This was sheer anticlimax. The one reflection it did suggest was a certain wonder at the failure of Vorishilov to take advantage of the position to strike a heavy blow at the German armies in this sector. They were obligingly offering him a vulnerable flank while they were pushing forward towards Smolensk. The army in Estonia was holding out magnificently. General Küchler could not even claim that he had contrived to defeat it. In the statement of August the 6th it was set forth that he had taken Dorpat (Tartu), Fellin and Pernau, throwing the Russians back north of Tapa. But the towns mentioned were all taken very early, by complete surprise. Dorpat was entered, for instance, on July the 3rd; and the Russian Commander very naturally concentrated his force near his main base. The Estonian ports were still held and for long after. It was one of the many amazing features of the titanic struggle that troops which were more or less cut off from the main body of the army held out so long. They always seemed to be retreating; they were always being beaten, but they survived to immobilize troops who would otherwise have been available for the attack upon more vital centres. If, with this gallant army stubbornly and skilfully holding its own in Estonia and the Germans east of Lake Peipus maintaining themselves precariously, Vorishilov had seized his opportunity it is almost inconceivable that the course of the campaign would not have been revolutionized.

The penetration of the 'Stalin Line' south of Lake Peipus was evidently not decisive. In the direction of Moscow the

breach, in a similar way, appeared at first to yield tangible results to hard fighting. Moscow had been mentioned as an immediate objective in the German News Agency's announcement of July the 13th. The road was 'open' and neither 'natural nor artificial' obstacles remained in the way! The High Command, though misunderstanding the situation fundamentally, was a little more cautious and set its eyes upon Smolensk as a first posting stage; and if the results achieved did not correspond with the new German expectation it was mainly due to the heroic stand of the Russian troops in the areas about Bialystok and Minsk. Hitler had already boasted that, after being encircled, they had been taken prisoner. Their sacrifice at least was not in vain.

There are no such things as impregnable positions and to estimate the value of river-lines on that basis is to confuse the situation. It is as foolish to underestimate as to exaggerate the defensive value of a river and, in fact, the Russian defensive crystallized on them. It is sound sense to make an ally of nature while bearing in mind that, like a human ally, it has the power of betrayal and may collapse more suddenly. The Dvina was of great assistance to the Russians for some time and bridgeheads were fought for with the greatest pertinacity. A foothold had been gained across the river, on both sides of Polotsk, in the first phase of the campaign; but the Germans were held there. It was apparently on July the 11th that an armoured unit made an entry into Vitebsk which also lies on the Dvina, in the angle where it turns up to the north-east; and although the struggle about the position continued for some days the town was in German hands, a smoking ruin, by the 13th. The outlet to the north was blocked as was that of Polotsk; but it was towards the south that the advance was directed.



7. *The Advance on Smolensk.*

The Advance to Smolensk

The great river Dnieper, which has been flowing in a generally northern direction for some hundreds of miles, makes a bend to the east, about fifty miles south of Vitebsk, and leaves a gap between it and the Dvina. It is true that the gap is crossed by a number of streams and pitted by lakes; but that is true of most of White Russia. Near the eastward bend of the Dnieper there are patches of firm ground free from river and lake and it was here that the Germans directed the spearhead of their attack. The thrust was directed against the line of the Dnieper south of Orsha while an armoured column, followed by infantry, entered the gap and crossed the Dnieper east of Orsha.

Fieldmarshal von Bock had at his disposal on this sector the two most experienced of the Panzer division commanders, Guderian and Hoth. In Poland and in France, each of them had played a notable part in harvesting the decisive results. Fieldmarshal von Klüge, another of the most experienced of the German commanders, with Generals Strauss and von Weicks, directed the three armies operating against Timoshenko and the unexpected nature of the advance was fully exploited. The stretch of the Dnieper which lies east of the Beresina was fortified and strongly held; and the German attack upon it pinned the troops down. But, east of Orsha, the Germans were able to cross after a sharp fight and they were then established in a position to turn the Dnieper position. A first-class road, as straight as if it were drawn with a ruler, links Orsha to Mohilev; and the road continues southward, parallel with the river, until it cuts the Rogachev-Roslavl road, about eighteen miles east of Rogachev. The Germans, after crossing the river east of Orsha, were on the Smolensk road, and could advance in that direction as well as down the Mohilev road. Smolensk lay only sixty-eight miles to the east. A

tank can travel further than that on the petrol it carries itself, without calling upon divisional supplies. The river crossing was exploited in both directions. Under its pressure part of the Dnieper line was turned. Mohilev, lying west of the river, seems to have been left intact but a suburb on the eastern side was entered on July the 14th. (The German wireless claimed that Mohilev had been captured on the same day 'after crossing the Dnieper'; but to have taken the town would have necessitated a re-crossing. This was either a confusion of the less with the greater or a misrepresentation.) The southward penetration appears to have gone little farther. Rogachev was entered a few days before, with Zhlobin which lies at the junction of the railway from Minsk to Kiev and the Leningrad line; but they remained in German hands only two days and on July the 13th were recaptured by a skilful counter-attack with tanks. There was heavy fighting still at Bobruisk, on the Beresina, thirty-five miles to the west.

But all that was immediately necessary for the Germans had been achieved. They wanted to safeguard the flank of their advance upon Smolensk and there were now available the first-class road from Vitebsk and the much poorer road south of the Dnieper. Tanks are not fastidious about roads and the advance south of the river was less expected. The Germans actually claimed that the city was in their hands on July the 16th; but the claim was not made until two days later, and this serves to throw light on the situation. Units were frequently out of touch with the Command for several days. German officers, even subordinate officers, are encouraged to take the initiative; and everything is condoned but irresolute action. What seems to have happened is the momentary entry into the city of a Panzer unit; and the same thing appears to have occurred at Kiev, on the same

day. The Russian communiqué mentioned on this day heavy fighting at Smolensk, and at Bobruisk, 180 miles to the south-west. In point of fact, it was almost four weeks before Smolensk was abandoned to the Germans and by that time all the demolitions that seemed necessary had been accomplished. It was much, however, that even the spearhead of the attack had penetrated so far; for the Germans do not lightly abandon any point they have reached and invariably attempt to grasp and retain it. The fierce battles which took place in this sector during the next few weeks were directed to broaden the wedge between Vitebsk and Mohilev. The armoured column pushed ahead north to Yartsevo and south towards Elnya. On July the 26th they were not far to the west of Vyazma, nearly 100 miles east of Smolensk. But three days before it had encountered a heavy Russian counter-attack which continued to make headway for two days and impose a check on the infantry advance. Indeed, although armoured units were south-west of Vyazma, the impression given by the recent days' fighting was that the second German thrust was exhausting itself.

The third part of the front in which the High Command thought they had effected a 'decisive' breach was the sector south of the Pripet Marshes. Here the penetration in the first thrust had been shallowest. Certain reasons have already been suggested, the greater density of the Russian concentration, the heterogeneous composition of the enemy armies and, perhaps, the greater stubbornness of the defence. It is conceivable that the first and the last of these reasons may be explained by the shorter distance from the Russo-German frontier to the principal objective, Kiev. This would imply that Marshal Budyonny controlled the movements of his opponent in a way that was impossible for Voroshilov and Timoshenko. In the first phase of the

offensive that seems to have been true. The 'forward zone' was shallower, less ground could safely be given, less ground was actually given. Yet, on this front, the most responsible of Hitler's Generals was in command; and it can scarcely have been to his or to the Führer's taste the advance should be so slight. This was so obvious that there was a distinct note of apology in the announcement of August the 6th. It was stated that the Russians were numerically superior, as is possible at the beginning, though hardly possible after the first week. It is, of course, probable that Budyonny had, proportionately to the attack, a bigger army than either Voroshilov or Timoshenko and this would account for his greater success; but this is not to say that his army was numerically superior to that of Field-marshal von Rundstedt. It was noted that the terrain is difficult. This is, at least in its implication, untrue. There was a Carpathian sector across which an advance would have been difficult; but the pocket of which this formed a side could have been cut off by a converging attack from the north and south against the main railway that supplied it. Such an attack was in fact delivered and proved abortive as we have seen. It was urged that the weather was bad. Some parts of the western Ukraine have a rich dark soil that turns into sticky mud with a little rain.

But that none of these was the real cause of the poor results was shown by the successes of the second thrust. At the opening of the attack, there was still heavy fighting at Novgorod Volinsk and the Russian artillery was inflicting heavy losses and successfully containing the tank units. It was not until July the 20th that the town was abandoned and the Russians withdrew to positions in advance of Zhitomir. But it seems clear that in these heavy tank clashes, some of the armoured units got through to Kiev. On

the night of July the 16th they penetrated to the suburbs and there was heavy fighting, as there was in the outskirts of Smolensk. But it was only an affair of tanks and it is accepted theory that, if the following infantry are held up, tanks alone may be no more than a nuisance. Kiev lies on the western bank of the river and the German detachment which had penetrated to it was flung back to the south-west. The Berlin wireless, on the day which saw this dash through Zhitomir ninety miles east to Kiev, spoke of Russian counter-attacks south-west of Kiev being thrown back on the 'line of the fortifications'; and it seemed as if the great city was about to fall. Indeed, on the following day, the German people, if they had not already learned to be chary of trusting even official statements, should have thought that, not only Kiev and not only Smolensk and Kiev were about to fall but the whole Russian Army was on the point of collapse.

It was on this day that the German communiqué stated that the Russians were attempting to stem the advance of Germany and her allies by 'throwing in their last reserves'; that in the vast 'decisive' struggle that was proceeding 'nine million' men were confronting each other and that great successes were imminent. In these days it was difficult to resist the impression that the German authorities were deliberately working up the people as a preparation for a great victory, at least a partial decision. Yet to penetrate to Kiev, Smolensk, or even Moscow could not be considered any great matter. The real difficulty is not penetration but the prevention of penetration. While a tank carries 100 to 150 miles in its containers and its divisional reservoir adds another 100 to 150 of fighting miles, armoured units can fight some 200 to 250 miles and, even in the great territories which Russia has spilled across Europe and

Asia, that means that tanks can penetrate almost anywhere the daring of their crews will venture. On July the 25th it was officially stated in Berlin that pressure towards Kiev was being increased; and after that the Kiev capture faded from official statements for some time.

The third week of July saw torrential downpours in the Ukraine and the attempt of the infantry to follow the tanks was slowed down. Round Zhitomir, for four or five days, the fighting apparently did not cease day or night; and indeed until the end of the month the right flank of Budyonny's army stood firm; but, although the attempt to take Kiev had been abandoned for the time, the thrust which was made past Zhitomir in that direction was used to deadly purpose in another direction. The column swung round between the Dnieper and Dniester in the rear of the armies to the west. The result of this enveloping movement was not seen in this period.

In the first thrust it has been noted that the operations on the Bessarabian front hung fire; but, in the second, new energy was infused into them. General Stuelpnagel and Fieldmarshal von Reichenau with the tank group of General Kleist had fought against the stubborn resistance of Budyonny's right wing and made slow headway at a cost of heavy casualties. When it was decided to reinforce von Rundstedt's group by giving him a fourth army an attempt was made to arrange that its intervention should be decisive. General Antonescu with German and Rumanian divisions was given the task of liberating his country from the Russians and after crossing the Pruth, he advanced to and crossed the Dniester. The direction of this advance was westward. The new army was composed of Rumanian and German troops under General Ritter von Schobert, who was to be killed later on before Odessa; and it was thrown

across the middle Dniester towards the north-east to establish contact with the troops coming down from the north. The effect of this movement was to cut off a number of Russian troops to the west and to assist in the Hungarian drive to the river Bug. The forces of von Rundstedt had now a tactical and numerical advantage which they were not slow to exploit.

The clearing of Bessarabia was not as smooth and as rapid as the German and Rumanian statements suggested. The German and Rumanian troops threw back the Russians 'to and across the Dniester' on July the 12th; but for many days after that the Rumanian communiqués were unable to report anything but the firing of oil tanks at Ploesti by Russian aeroplanes and raids upon Bucharest. Night after night the oil tanks were set on fire, and the ports and capital raided. This did not noticeably hearten the Rumanians and in each army that these troops figured German divisions were added to stiffen their fibre. There were some desertions of complete units. Nevertheless, Antonescu set about clearing up Bessarabia. Kishinev was taken on July the 16th. It was, once more, officially announced as captured two days later when other centres were taken. On July the 19th the Dniester was crossed at several points, the main force crossing at Kamenetz-Podolsk under von Schobert. The Russians were withdrawing on this part of the front to conform with their retirement to the north; and the Germans and Rumanians who were following were not accurately to be described as 'pursuing'. But in the third week of July the 'German, Rumanian, Hungarian and Slovak troops in the Ukraine' who were officially represented as 'pressing forward in an unceasing pursuit' were now fighting in the area east of the upper course of the Bug, and the Dniester defences were in process of being out-

flanked. The Russian position in the Western Ukraine was becoming more and more confused. Marshal Budyonny was attempting to withdraw his left centre pivoting on his right; but the enemy was attacking heavily from the west and had units driving towards his rear. Bodies of the retreating troops were cut off and much material was lost. The Germans repeatedly thrust into the units which were escaping. There were small local encirclements. But though the Russian position was bad, the troops were no beaten fugitives and frequently struck back heavily against the enemy. It was only at the end of the month that Bessarabia was clear and the German and Rumanian troops had reached the Lower Dnieper. This flank held firm. The right made its readjustments with courage and deliberation. It lay at the beginning of August about Korosten, a junction on the single-track railway from Lublin (Poland) to Kiev, some forty-eight miles due north of Zhitomir, and Byelaya Tserkov, about seventy miles south-east of Zhitomir. From these two places Kiev was threatened with a pincers movement by the Panzer units of General Schmidt. But the pincers were never able to close. The Russian troops below had found no safe position on which to stand and, in a hopeless tactical position, were to reel into terrific battles that threatened to destroy the bulk of Marshal Budyonny's force and tear away the whole of the southern flank.

This account of the struggle of the second German thrust gives some idea of the territorial gages of the campaign and by the nature and extent of the advance upon the three main sectors suggests how the struggle was developing. But it gives no indication of its quality. It was unique in that the idea of a battle 'line' or battle front had entirely disappeared. There were a hundred battles taking place at towns and centres divided by vast distances. While a

fierce clash was taking place near Vyazma, a prolonged and destructive battle was being fought out nearly 200 miles to the south-west at Mohilev. The suburbs of this historic town had been entered on July the 14th, after the Germans had struck south across the eastern bend of the Dnieper and pressed down towards its rear. They advanced upon the town also from the west and it was gradually encircled with the Russian divisions defending that sector of the Dnieper. For a fortnight the Germans were detained there fighting with the utmost fury against the Russian troops before they were able to break down their resistance and capture those who remained alive at the end, with their guns and transport. These small bodies of troops, which attempted to hold up the German infantry following along the lanes opened up by the Panzer attacks, were generally, like the Mohilev divisions, the units at Bialystok and those at Minsk, compelled in the end to surrender. They were cut off from all support and fought long battles out of the control of the High Command and without their knowledge. In this novel area or zonal fighting such isolated battles were inevitable and even if they led to the capture of troops and material, they immobilized, far from the limit reached by the Panzer thrusts, bodies of German troops and masses of material which might have been used with decisive effect. The vagueness of the Russian communiqués was a reflection of the type of warfare which, escaping from control, evaded also the knowledge of the Command. The German Command was not in much better case. While the units were encouraged and pressed to develop their advance to the limits of their power, it was impossible for their whereabouts and condition to be made known. Tanks are provided with wireless equipment and liaison between the units and the Command has been developed to a high pitch

of perfection; but for safety's sake the most advanced and isolated elements could not communicate with headquarters.

The Russian units left behind were frequently cut off and where they were cut off were generally surrounded and compelled to surrender. But some cut themselves free as units, some escaped in trickles of a handful of men at a time. This was admitted by the Germans who, naturally, regarded it as a wholly novel phenomenon, a cause of irritation, a factor which frequently tended to upset the order which German organization seeks to produce; in fine, something quite unfair. Guerrilla warfare developed to an extent unknown in any modern campaign in Europe. Far behind the battle 'front', in the great spaces which were in the nominal occupation of the Germans, small bodies of determined men with a more or less adequate equipment roamed at large preying upon the lines of communication and destroying isolated bodies of Germans, consuming the supplies on the way to the advanced units and making life even more precarious for the invader. Volumes might be written on the exploits of these guerrilla bands and it would be idle to ignore the service they performed.

But campaigns between great modern armies are not decided by guerrilla action. The very meaning of the word explains the limited scope of such operations. Indeed, at times it seemed a little ominous that the Russians should emphasize this aspect of their struggle. The impression suggested was that this was the most of which Russia was capable. It is far from certain that there is not an element of truth in this inference; but the more obvious explanation of the Russian attitude was the proletarian outlook of the administration. Of much more importance in the development of the campaign were the counter-attacks. These were delivered at points of the front by units of various size,

but they never reached the dimensions of a counter-offensive. They were frequently directed with much skill and violence. They not only checked the speed of the advance and exacted a heavy price for every gain, but they also kept the Russian *morale* high. It is unusual to find an army persistently retreating and evacuating its own territory for a long period without losing its *morale*. For the six weeks covered by the first and second phases of this campaign the Russians had continued to give ground. The pace had slowed down but the retreat did not cease. If it appeared to end on one sector, it made greater headway on another. From the East Prussian frontier to Smolensk the distance is about 350 miles; and the Germans were now 50 miles or so beyond Smolensk. The active defence kept alight that vital factor of *morale* without which no victory can be won. The introduction of fresh units from the gigantic Russian reserve also helped to keep the *morale* high. However the matter be explained, the fact that nowhere and at no time did the resistance show signs of failing or the *morale* of decline is one of the most remarkable features of the campaign. The Russian armies fell back and, at times, as in the Ukraine, fell back in some disorder. But that was the fault of the Command which had permitted the units to drift into tactical conditions under which a stand and even an ordered retreat were impossible.

The Russian Air Force which the German communiqués had cruelly and repeatedly annihilated continued to assist the ground forces not only by reconnaissance and not only by attacking the enemy lines of communication, transport and troop concentrations but also by close support. Without its continued assistance it is difficult to conceive how the Russian Army could have continued to hold out against the attack of the strongest army the world has ever known,

The Russian fleet also supported the ground forces. It covered the flanks of the army continually. Its action in the Baltic has been described; and it is a striking fact that the attempts to assist the development of the campaign in Estonia and to capture the islands of Oesel and Dago, in order to pen the Russian Baltic fleet in Krondstadt, all failed. In the Black Sea a force transported behind the Russian flank would have been an invaluable help to von Rundstedt. There was never an attempt to launch such an expedition. The Russian Black Sea fleet prevented that development without striking a blow.

In the special announcement from the Führer's headquarters on August the 6th much of the success was attributed to the thorough organization of the lines of communication and lines in the rear. This part of the German success was remarkable. In the vast distances which the army covered the communications played an essential part. Even if troops can be under-fed or starved without disaster, the starvation of rifles and guns means defeat. Material never made so great an impact on any war as it did on this; and material differs from human nature in the inexorable character of its needs. Panzer units are merely sitting targets if deprived of the regular supply of petrol, and guns are even more useless without ammunition. The Germans were found to have no liking for the bayonet. The guerrilla bands disturbed the communications and, even without this handicap, there was a difficulty that mere success entailed. The Russian railways were of a different gauge and, as a consequence, they could only be used either by changing it and using German rolling stock or by using Russian rolling stock. The latter, it speedily became clear, was never to be available, and hence the Germans had patiently to set themselves to changing the gauge to suit their own rolling

stock. The striking thing is that they accomplished it. Almost alone of the peoples of the world the Germans can face unlimited mechanical labour without flinching. They can even face and carry out labour which has no more than a purely temporary and, perhaps, very fleeting value. The immense labours involved in the Russian campaign were carried through without a thought; and it was only the Russian interference that ever disturbed the perfect functioning of the communications.

Their value was emphasized by every development of modern war. The consumption of material was immense; the wastage immense. Germany lost much less material than Russia and was able by well-organized maintenance to reclaim and put back into use material that had suffered damage. But this, once more, made its calls on supply. Spare parts had continually to be brought up to the front and the daily use of any one of the numerous commodities which support an army—food, petrol, ammunition—must have been so vast that the problem of the campaign seemed to be reducible to the factor of supply. It is easy to dismiss this as a simple question of railway lines; but lines are of no use without appropriate rolling stock and the German railways, even in the first year of the war, were running badly because there comes a time when replacement can no longer be avoided. But when we have admitted this we are no nearer a practical conception of how Germany added the distance of occupied Poland and conquered Russian territory to her responsibilities without a breakdown somewhere. The effect must have been very much the same as if the transport of Germany had been suddenly reduced to a half, or even less. If we think this all, we are making a profound mistake. The burden on the railways to support the five million men Germany was using in Russia and bring back

the continuous stream of wounded must have been immense. But the railways even where they are highly developed, cannot meet the whole of the problem; and in Russia they are comparatively few. From the railhead there must be almost inconceivably heavy and continuous streams of motor transport to the 'front'. Five million men! On reflection the organization of a body like that seems more impressive than the persistent advance across Russia.

It is clear that graver than the problem of material wastage was that of the vast number of the casualties. The Germans admitted that the Russians were the bitterest enemy they had encountered, and it is certain that the total of the German casualties was very great. The advancing army does not commonly lose prisoners and comparatively few Germans were captured by the Russians; it sends its wounded to hospital and, in time, a considerable proportion returns to the fighting line. Its effective loss therefore is practically no more than its dead. The retreating army loses not only prisoners, but also the bulk of its wounded; and its losses therefore cannot fail to be much heavier. Russia's casualties were, like her loss of material, very much greater than those of Germany; but these were much heavier than had been contemplated. In a statement of the position handed by the British Ambassador to the Turkish President, about this time, it was estimated that the minimum loss of the German Army was one million. She had engaged some five million men in Russia out of a total of seven million. Her casualties were therefore about 20 per cent of the force engaged and 15 per cent of the whole army. Is that an excessive estimate? A proportion of these men would return to their units; but probably all could be written off for the purposes of the campaign, since, at the end of this period, there could be at most three

months of campaigning weather. The German casualties may even have been greater. The Prime Minister put them much higher. They must at least have been of this order. The Russian Army was admirably equipped and each unit was provided with a number of automatic weapons, with light and heavy machine-guns, with artillery and with tanks. No-one in the world has suggested that the Russian troops did not fight with the most stubborn courage. General Duval, in France, made a special point of this and drew the natural inference that the Germans must be suffering heavy losses. While this matter must of necessity be left to conjecture, much evidence goes to substantiate the general inference and it became clearer as the campaign proceeded.

As the second great thrust wore itself out the outline of its achievement became clearer. On August the 4th it was definitely stated in Moscow that Smolensk was then in Russian hands and in normal communication with the rest of Russia and that Minsk was still held by the Russian garrison in communication with headquarters.* A theatrical company left Moscow on the preceding Saturday to entertain the troops in the city.† Yet there were Germans to the east of the city and a battle was developing there. From north to south the front lay somewhat as follows. The Germans had carried forward their positions to Pskov and a little to the north-east, to Porkov and past Novorzhev in the direction of Kholm; they had thrust eastward towards Nevel and about Gorodok had driven farther eastwards a wedge, taking in Vitebsk, past Smolensk but not including it; they held the eastward elbow of the Dnieper with Orsha and Mohilev and as far south as Rogachev; thence the front

* A. T. Chollerton, *The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post.*
† Reuter.

ran west of the railway line to Korosten from which junction it was drawn to the south-east in advance of Byelaya Tserkov to curve to the south-west across to the line of the Dniester opposite Kishinev. It will at once be noted that of the three 'decisive points' at which the special communiqué of August claimed a breach that which pointed to Leningrad had proved a sort of appendix, a cul de sac; the central penetration had reached and even passed Smolensk but had not taken it, not even completely isolated it; and the southern breach though it, too, had opened the door to the main objective, Kiev, had not enabled the Germans to capture it. None of the three had, in fact, proved 'decisive'. Terrific fighting had certainly won great advantages for the enemy. The Germans were everywhere well inside the Russian frontiers; but after nearly a month's fighting beyond the Stalin Line they had now realized how little decisive it was to penetrate these positions. Apparently at the beginning of the second thrust they were thinking in a terminology that belonged to the last war.

This question of positions which had caused so much misunderstanding in France and even in this country had received a fresh commentary by weeks of often confused but always heroic fighting on the Russian front; and it is very odd to find the first military nation mistaking its meaning. They had profited by the French reliance upon positions. They had sufficient appreciation of the real meaning and value of defences, sufficient discrimination between the dynamic and static defensive, sufficient knowledge that the human factor is paramount, not to think it necessary to bring against the Stalin Line a three to one superiority either in men or in 'power units'. In point of fact they never had either. They knew that the only country that could match their own equipment was Russia and they advanced against

the Stalin Line in the full confidence of their discipline, training and *morale*. As a matter of mere history they were successful in driving wedges into the positions; but how far these were decisive we have seen.

But most of what has been described gives little indication of the German strategy. In the broad it can be recognized that it was to achieve a decision since that is the objective of every Commander. But how this was expressed in the operations has yet to be seen. The three main territorial objectives, Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev, were aimed at as the symbols of a decision. It was thought that if they fell, or if any one of them fell, the Russian Army would be thrown into such disorder that it would be ripe for the *coup de grace*. Consider what would have been the position if, say, Leningrad fell. The northern flank of the main Russian concentration would then be open. If Moscow were taken the main concentration would be cut in two and each part could be dealt with in turn, as happened in France. Germany does not shrink from the notion of a super-Cannae. The double envelopment is the core of their tactical theory and training.

These developments depended upon the factor of time. If the Russian armies were to be given the requisite time, they might choose, as they had in 1812, and during the preceding six weeks, to withdraw and abandon territory rather than risk the destruction of their armies. It was apparently the German conviction that they could cut through to Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev so rapidly that the Russian armies would have no time to withdraw and regroup. In the first two thrusts they never came within sight of that development. They continued to strike, as it were, into a blanket that gives in a massive way and returns to its former position. But the German staff did not

abandon hope that they would sooner or later achieve their end.

It was on the southern sector that they came nearest to the realization of their purpose. The *Drang nach Osten* still inspired their dreams. Up to the present it had been rather a question of prestige and dominion than of positive necessity; but in the present war sheer necessity was the motive that revived the determination to press forward towards the east. It was in the nearer east, in the Ukraine and the Donetz basin, that the wheat and minerals were to be found. It was in the Middle East that all the accessible oil lay. It was in the Middle East that, in possession of territories holding all the commodities necessary for life and war on the modern plane, they could look east and south to places where they could challenge the British Empire. If they could reach the Persian Gulf they would be installed in a position which Britain considered essential to the maintenance of her sea power. They could control from there the Iranian and Iraqi as well as the Russian oil; and if they wished they could threaten India or restore the converging threat upon the Suez Canal which Italy had had the power but not the nerve to apply.

It was presumably for this reason that the Commander-in-Chief had placed upon the southern sector the most competent of his commanders, Fieldmarshal von Rundstedt; and, when he interposed the new army of von Schobert, it was with the intention of giving sufficient weight to the thrust in the south to break through the defence of Budyonny and roll up the southern flank. If the Caucasus was his goal, as it seems certain it was, it was not sufficient to reach that territory, but to arrive there with no anxiety as to his flanks and his communications. Either the Russian armies had to be destroyed, immobilized or driven suffi-

ciently far to the east to be incapable of seriously threatening the march to the east. As we have seen there was some confusion in the centre of the Budyonny group of armies; and already they had been driven into a position which was untenable. There were possibilities in this direction which in the next phase he was to exploit.

But, in this project also, the time factor intruded and conditioned the development; and upon the southern front there was as yet no sign of that bustled retreat from which there is no recovery. The most dangerous-looking position was in the centre of the front about Smolensk. Even there, at the moment, the position was unresolved. The Germans, in fine, had at very great cost achieved very remarkable victories; but they had so far secured nothing commensurate with the outlay. They were hag-ridden by the dream of world dominion. They continued to win battle after battle. But even in Germany the impression was taking shape that each battle won merely led to another; and the victory and the peace that were wanted were as far off as ever.

CHAPTER 18

East and Farther East

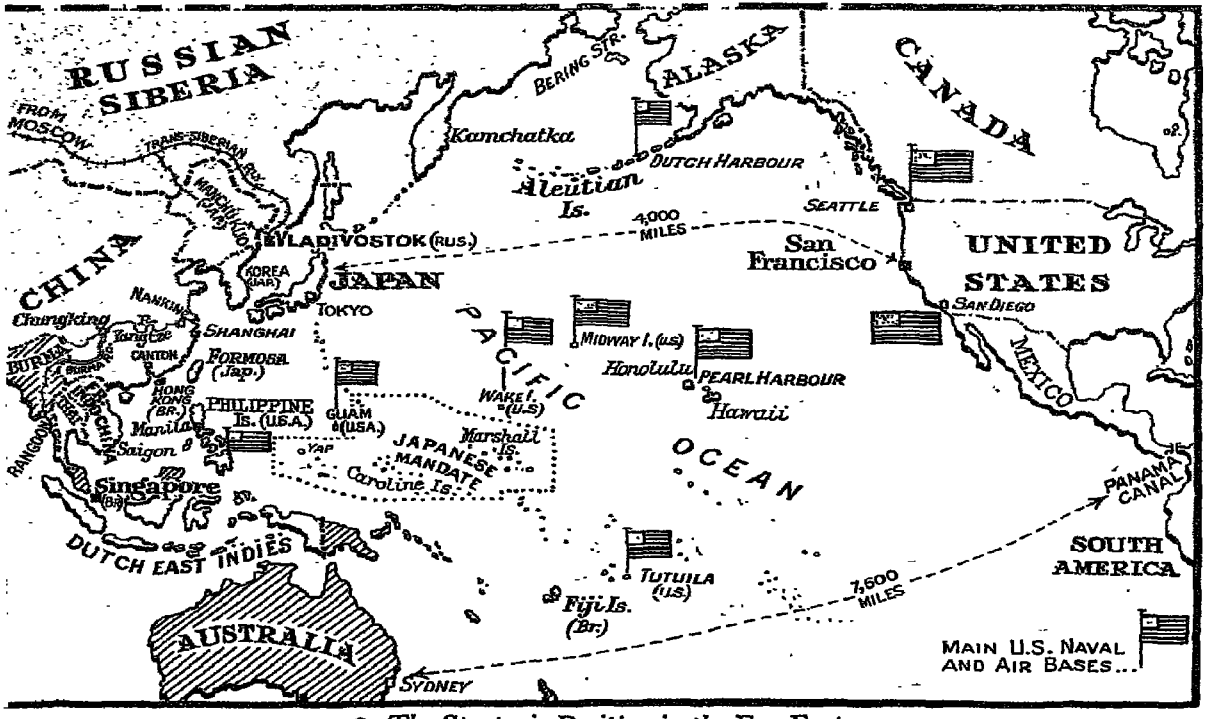
Throughout all the operations, apparently as successful as the heart of the most ambitious could desire, and announced to the world as exceeding any the world has even witnessed before, there ran as an undercurrent a movement that depreciated them all. It was the attempt to spread the war by involving other nations in it. This move to create diversions, thoroughly sound in itself and much more effective in fact than anyone in Britain wished to admit, was itself an admission by Germany of the need for further insurance against defeat. In no direction was this clearer than in the Far East. Germany had nothing to offer Japan except a blessing upon all the conquests she could make; and if Japan had been the realist nation she fancies herself she would have realized that Germany really wished for her help and could offer no consideration for the grant of it. Much later in the year some such misgiving appears to have tinctured her ambitions with caution.

But Japan was at present a grave concern of Britain and hardly less of the United States. It was to her interest to keep the two great nations apart; in fact she drove them together. Britain having realized the threat to her position in the Far East and even, though more remotely, to India, had already made preparations to meet it; and like a fugue

there ran through the events of the spring and summer the reports of repeated arrivals of British and Imperial troops at Singapore. Air-Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Far East and his widespread visits of inspection at once infused new life and vigour into the defensive plans. He inspected the British Forces in Malaya, in Burma and in Hong Kong; and a unity began to develop from these diverse elements. Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton was in charge of the naval squadron; and from the sea Singapore, the great base and centre of the Far Eastern defence, was regarded as impregnable.

Singapore could hardly be said to threaten Japan except in so far as it was the key to the Indian Ocean, and from the China Sea there could be no direct traffic to the west while that fortress stood. It lies nearly 3,000 miles from Tokyo and at that distance can hardly be thought to threaten the living-room of the capital of Japan. Clearly it is a bar to the southward and westward expansion of Japan. It is a distinct military threat to aggression; but none at all to her peaceful penetration and, in fact, it had been on Japan's communications all the time that Japan was pursuing that policy in India. It controlled the highway between Australia and New Zealand and Britain, and also access to the Dutch East Indies. It had been designed to accommodate the heaviest warships and was the only base which could have been used for operations in the China Seas. It is also a great air base; and is most vulnerable from the land side, by the Malay peninsula, or by air. Singapore is in sum, like the British Navy, an immense threat to aggression but the guarantor of peaceful expansion.

It was because of its vulnerability from the land side that reinforcements of picked troops were constantly being sent



8. *The Strategic Position in the Far East.*

there, Indian divisions trained to the highest pitch of excellence, Australians, British and New Zealand troops. They were not only splendid troops, they were as nearly perfectly equipped as they could be made. The position was further strengthened by the arrival of numerous squadrons of the Royal Air Force with the latest aircraft in commission. The defence force was as fine a body of men and as thoroughly equipped as can be found anywhere in the world. For obvious reasons its exact dimensions and constitution or the strength of the naval squadron cannot be given; but, at least, it can be said with perfect propriety that it was strong enough to make the task of defeat something of a gamble for any force Japan can afford to send against it. Singapore lies, however, some 1,700 miles to the south of Hong Kong and about 200 miles farther from Shanghai; and these distances, in terms of strategy, mean a good deal. The base was about 1,500 miles south of the Philippines.

It was in the early days of spring that Germany began to speak of the possibility of a 'third front' in the Far East and there were not too obscure hints of the Straits and Singapore. M. Matsuoka, the Foreign Minister, echoed the hints in his own terms and discussed Japan's southward policy. In spite of the long context of such speeches it seemed a little strange that a nation with so precarious an economy should even dream of further military adventures when the war with China was still on her hands. It was all the more remarkable because it seemed absurd to discuss one's intentions aloud rather than put them into action without giving the destined victims time to prepare a defence. The obvious reactions took place. On February the 18th Mr. Roosevelt signed an order creating defensive 'sea areas' and 'air space reservations' which might not be

entered by ships or aircraft without the authorization of the Secretary of the United States Navy, except by ships and aircraft of the United States. Among the bases mentioned in the schedule were the various groups of islands belonging to the United States in the Pacific Ocean; and it was on the next day that one of the largest convoys that had ever been sent to the Far East arrived at Singapore. Officials were careful to notify Japan that the arrival was no more than a purely defensive measure and had no suggestion of hostile intent; but it was an apt commentary upon M. Matsuoka's statements about his southern policy.

Japan began to assert her interest in the south by mediating between Thailand and the French colony of Indo-China; and, when the terms re-drawing the frontier were initialled on March the 3rd, they were found to include the cession of a large slice of French territory. It was to the interest of Japan to weaken and humiliate the Vichy Government in the Far East in pursuance of her southern designs; and the treaty was considered a triumph for Japan. Fresh from these successes M. Matsuoka went west to visit his Axis friends. He was in Berlin on March the 26th and an undesigned hitch occurred in the demonstrations of German power which had been arranged for him. He saw the Yugoslav acceptance of the Axis demands and heard a schoolmasterly lecture from Ribbentrop; but then the signature was disowned in act if not in word and King Peter took control. However, the Japanese Foreign Minister remained long enough in Europe to see the beginning of Germany's revenge; and, in any case, he was prepared to take much on faith. He was feted in Berlin and made a public speech in which he even dared to make a jest, adroitly turned into a compliment to Hitler. He visited Rome and returned to Berlin; and then went to Moscow. Hitler was at that time

pursuing his usual circuitous policies and urged Japan to sign a treaty with Russia. The treaty was duly signed on April the 13th and a few days later Japan occupied Foochow, about midway between Shanghai and Hong Kong. Three weeks later very heavy reinforcements reached Singapore from Great Britain.

While these developments were going on, Japan was also attempting to secure advantages from the Dutch East Indies. The desire to have the imports quota scheme revised was natural enough; but the Netherlands Government had no mind to be dragooned into any agreement in which all the advantages were on one side. The attempt to secure a footing in the Indies on the ground of the desire to work certain undeveloped territories was replied to with dignity and firmness. But, after the European grand tour, greater pressure was brought to bear upon Japan to take action in the south China Sea, and there began the familiar procedure that the Axis has adopted as an implied tribute of vice to virtue. Whom the Axis wish to destroy they first protect, might be taken as the description. Whenever they were bent on invasion they set about broadcasting the story that the country was about to be invaded by Britain and was clearly too weak to resist. In their ardent desire for the independence of the country they proposed to occupy it for its protection. With his southern policy in mind, M. Matsuoka set the ball rolling about Indo-China. There are bases in that colony which are only about 600 miles from Singapore and, therefore, within distant bombing range. In the middle of July the Japanese Press was hard at work suggesting that Britain intended to invade Indo-China. After the experience of Syria, it is possible that Vichy France was inclined to give ear to the suggestions from Japan; and undoubtedly she must have been subject to considerable pres-

sure. She gave way; and, on July the 24th, the occupation of Indo-China began. This advance it will be noted very considerably added to the isolation of Hong Kong. Japan now occupied bases on the line of advance to Hong Kong; and she was in a position to threaten Thailand and Burma. The move was carefully considered, and it was reported that about 40,000 troops were landed. The United States acted at once. On July the 26th Japanese assets were frozen by the Government. Great Britain not only froze all Japanese credits but broke off her trade treaties with Japan. The reply was sufficiently pointed to give Japan to think. But she was now under great pressure from Germany to take action against Russia in the Far East. This was by no means as easy as it seemed. The Russian Far Eastern army was self-contained, operating from its own bases in the Far East, and was not only composed of some of the finest Russian divisions but was about three times as large as the Japanese army in the neighbourhood at the time. Even with heavy reinforcements the Japanese army was stated to amount to no more than about 350,000 men as against a million of the Russians. Under such circumstances and the fact that in all the clashes which had taken place between the two armies the advantage had remained with the Soviet troops, the prospect seemed less attractive as it approached realization. There the matter rests. The occupation of Indo-China had taken place under another Foreign Minister. The Japanese Government resigned on July the 16th and two days later Prince Konoye formed a new Cabinet. From its first actions it did not appear to be very different from the former Cabinet. Regarded from this point it remained an enigma for the future to interpret; but of the importance of the interpretation there cannot be the slightest doubt.

The Hess Episode

But this event was not the only enigmatic event of the period. The notorious Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, landed in Scotland on May the 12th. Hitler had made his private speech to the Party members about his designs on Russia just over a week before, and he then made it clear that some of those in his confidence opposed the policy and suggested that before taking that drastic step Britain should be given another chance to accept a Hitler peace. Hess was one of these; and he apparently thought that if he could secure the ear of the right people in Britain he would be able to convince them that it was their duty to bring pressure upon the Government. The young peer he came to see was no friend of his but simply one whose name he knew and whom he had seen in Berlin. This attempt to win Britain over to a compromise peace was founded upon a complete misapprehension of the feeling of the people and was doomed to sterility from the beginning. The sole importance of his flight to Scotland was the amusing difficulties it created for German propaganda. He was said to be suffering from delusions, he was mad, he was an invalid; and so on. Hess can hardly have thought that he would throw his friends into so much dismay when he flew across the North Sea; and he can have thought still less that he would raise so little excitement and so speedily cease to arouse even a flicker of interest.

Turkey

Another was the Treaty of Friendship signed between Turkey and Germany on June the 18th. The way of the neutral is hard. The Germans do not admit that anyone has

the right to remain neutral; and, as they intend to spread the war across the world, sooner or later everyone will be compelled to choose upon which side of the fence he will come down. The worst course for a neutral is, thinking she can remain out of the war, to play a lone hand. That means defeat and final embodiment in the Axis. Turkey had to face this choice when the Germans were threatening the Balkans. It is certain that she would have joined a defensive Balkan *bloc*; but when Bulgaria joined the Axis and Yugoslavia could not make up her mind before it was too late, she stood aside. Since then, though proclaiming her loyalty to Britain as an ally, and insisting that her obligations under that heading should not be forgotten, she had been courted and threatened by Germany. The enemy wants the free use of the Dardanelles, and Turkey as the keeper of the gates has refused. She wants a way through Turkey to Syria and Palestine, and now to the Caucasus. Turkey has refused. But she has signed this treaty which she no doubt hopes will keep war away from her territory, as it has done up to the present. But what will be her position when the next demands come from Germany, flushed with successes upon the southern front? The answer to that question only time can supply.

The Allies and the New Order

The German position has been for some time that she has established the new order and that peace reigns over Europe. There was a suggestion at the beginning of June, when the two dictators met on the Brenner Pass, that a declaration might be made to that effect in the hope that Britain and the United States would see the folly of con-

tinuing the resistance. At that time Russia might have been brought to accept the position. Spain would have agreed; and, perhaps, Portugal might have been brought to accept if nothing more was required of her. What would, what could, Turkey have done? The possibility was sufficiently serious for a great meeting to be arranged in London to state the position of the European Governments which were free to state their attitude. The meeting was imposing. Besides the Prime Minister and several members of the Cabinet, the High Commissioners of the Dominions, and representatives of the Governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Yugoslavia were present with representatives of General de Gaulle. The meeting was addressed by Mr. Churchill and adopted the resolution, 'That they will continue the struggle against German or Italian oppression until victory is won, and will mutually assist each other in this struggle to the utmost of their respective capacities.' So that door was barred; and Mr. Churchill's ringing words made the assurance clear beyond any possibility of misunderstanding, when he said that they had all drawn the swords in the cause, and would never let them fall until life was gone or victory was won.

Smolensk

That was on June the 12th. Ten days later Germany attacked Russia and, through weeks of terrific battles, smashed and battered her way to the east in the endeavour to secure a sufficient territory sufficiently rich to defy any attempt to redeem it. The course of these battles has been traced as far as it is possible to read them at present and

probably for some considerable time to come. Germany claimed to have taken Smolensk on July the 16th, when her Panzer units reached the outskirts and were driven off. Then began a series of operations to widen the wedge that had been driven past the city and to destroy the armies which were still opposing their resistance to the German occupation. These battles lasted for about three weeks, the Germans endeavouring to surround the Russians and capture them, as the best way of removing the resistance to their occupation of so large a city and using the communications that centred in it. These battles were fought out with the utmost fury and the Russians exerted every effort to deny Smolensk to the enemy. It is not known when the city was fully evacuated. The struggle was sufficiently in hand by August the 5th to justify the High Command in claiming that it was over. By August the 11th it was in German hands; and the Russian communiqué on the 13th announced that it had been evacuated 'a few days' before.

With the capture of Smolensk a milestone in the campaign had been passed. The exact value of the success remained for the future to interpret. Cities, even great cities with a long tradition and a thousand memories, matter little in the last resort; and the German Staff, while attempting to extract every particle of propaganda value out of it, knew that well. Whether its loss would so weaken the Russians morally or materially that the army would be brought nearer defeat was the question that required an answer; and the moving events of the future supplied it.

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